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WESTERN STORY MAGAZINE

MAR. 27 1937

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By John Dudley Phelps

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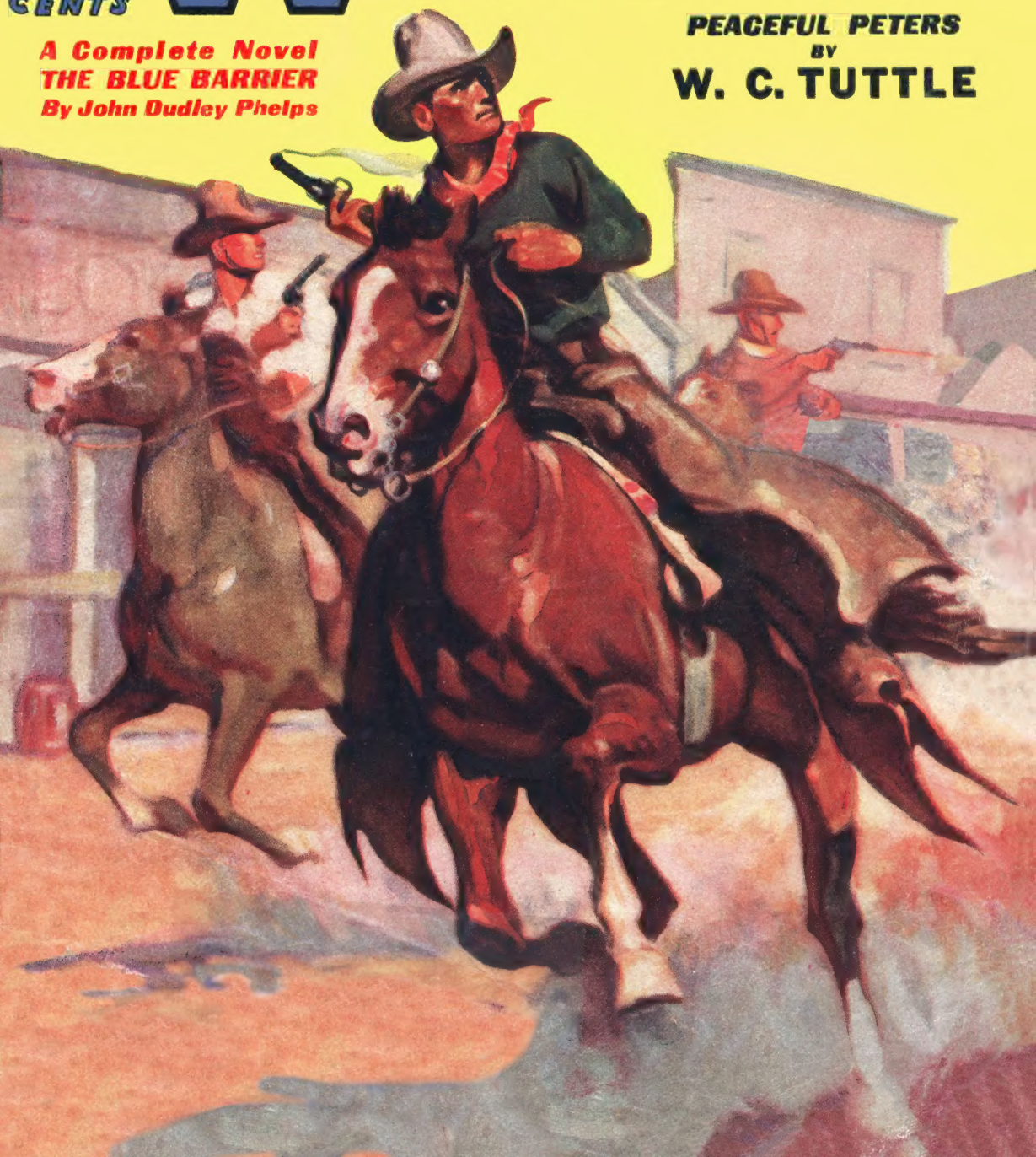
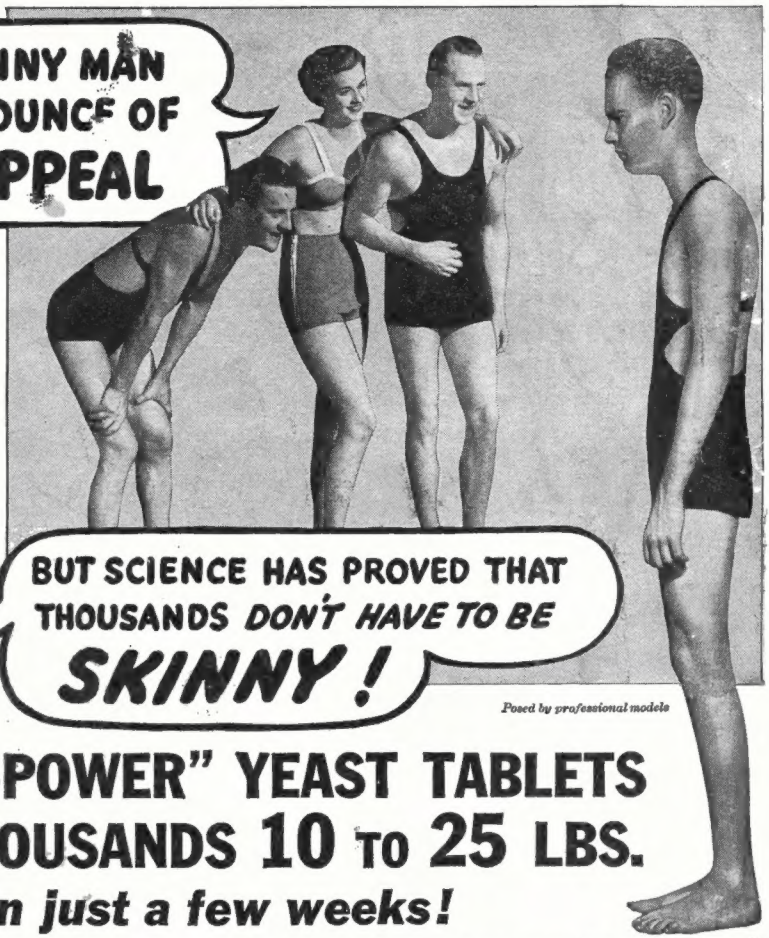
BY
W. C. TUTTLE



NO SKINNY MAN HAS AN OUNCE OF SEX APPEAL



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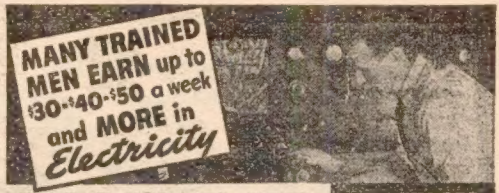

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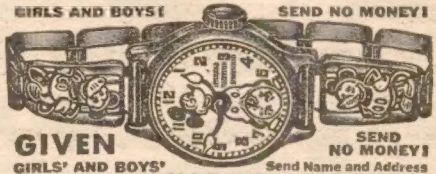

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30x5.00-20	2.85	1.05
5.25-17	2.90	1.15
29x5.25-18	2.90	1.15
29x5.25-19	2.95	1.15
30x5.25-20	2.95	1.15
31x5.25-21	3.25	1.15
5.50-17	3.35	1.15
28x5.50-18	3.35	1.15
29x5.50-19	3.35	1.15
6.00-17	3.40	1.15
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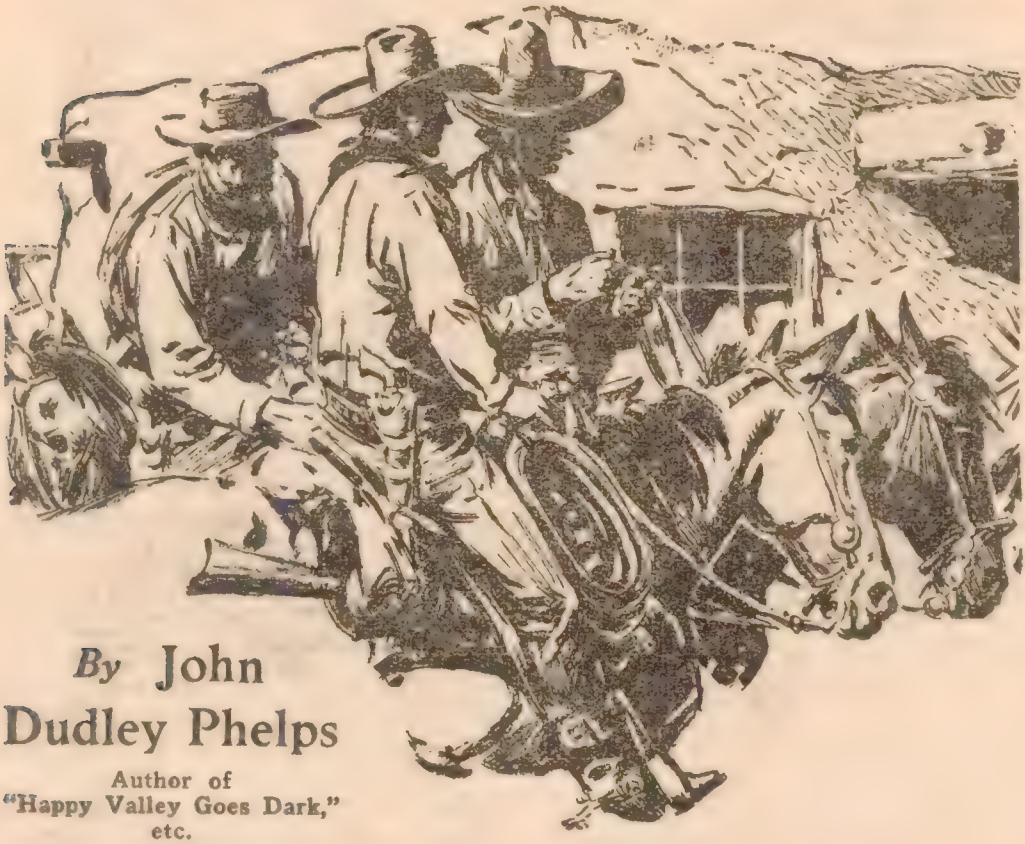


By John Dudley Phelps

Author of
"Happy Valley Goes Dark,"
etc.

CHAPTER I.

SHEEP WAR.

THE two cowboys held each other covered there in the narrow, dark passage between two buildings. Each man saw before him the head and shoulders of his adversary silhouetted against the morning light at a passage end. Each gun held as steady as though frozen in its position.

The man at the south end spoke first to say: "Better drop that sack you're packin' and h'ist your six-gun. I got a bead plumb on your middle."

"Same here," replied the other man, "only I shoot closer'n you do. I'm holdin' right spang on your gizzard"—this man's voice was cheerful. "As for this sack, I'd just as soon drop her." His left hand released the cloth bag which, as it struck the hard earth, gave forth a jingling, metallic sound.

"That why they wanted you took? You rob a bank?"

The other laughed quietly.

"Nope," he assured the other. "There's twenty-five pounds of fencin' staples in the sack."

"Fencin' staples!"

"Yeh, things you stick barb' wire to fence posts with. 'Nother thing, you're a tee-total stranger to these parts or you'd know this one-

hoss town of Palma ain't got a bank."

"I'm a stranger, O. K."

The other gave him no time for further talk.

He asked, "Would you mind tellin' me why you, a stranger, horned in with this Mundo gang to corral me?"

"I hired out to Mundo. I gotta stick to the brand."

"Fair enough, but tell me, since when have they took to brandin' sheep?"

"Sheep!"

"Yeh, woolly critters what go baa-baa and smell."

"Y-y-yuh tellin' me I hired out to a sheep outfit?"

"You sure did, cowboy. Now, quiet down. Let's sort this business out. I'm Fred Milnor, a cowpoke working on Hiram Croft's Crowfoot Bench spread. I came to town for staples, and, wanting to wet my whistle, blew into the Red Steer Bar. I slumped down at the corner table to rest. One of Mundo's men came in with another hombre I don't know. I overheard Mundo's jugadee telling how Mundo was driving sheep to the grass lands tother side of the Tierra Blanca Hills. 'Bout that time, the Mundo feller spotted me and knew I was wise. I didn't linger; I beat it, staples and all. I had to tell my boss that Mundo figures to sheep jump his feedin' grounds. Our cows gotta range there. Maybe you noticed the country's sort of dry."

"Worse drought I ever see," said the other.

"I've made my medicine talk," Milnor said. "I can prove my words. Look here." He shoved his gun in its holster. "You take the pulpit, stranger."

Milnor was sure of himself. His eyes had become accustomed to the semiobscurity of the place and he had sized up the strange cowboy who was young—about Milnor's age—and had every mark of cow country about him.

Slowly, the other holstered his gun and stood in thought for a few moments.

"You talk straight, Milnor," he remarked, "and we talk the same language. My name is Owen. I'm called Chuck. My luck ain't been so good and I lost my last dollar at Witch Creek buckin' the tiger. Met a feller there who said he could get me a ridin' job with a feller named Mundo. We rode to Palma and I got the job. Four other riders were hired at the same time."

"Were you told what your job was?" Milnor shot in.

"Yes. Our job was to guard range. That was reasonable on account of the drought. We weren't going to Mundo's home ranch, but direct to our stampin' ground."

"How many guards, Chuck?"

"Don't know. Quite a few, I reckon, 'cause I heard talk of a cook and a pack train for the grub." He paused. "What you say stacks up all right. Several little things are clear now. My horse is tied next to a light wagon that belongs to Mundo. I saw some new bells, small ones, in the wagon bed. Didn't think of it at the time, but I know now they were sheep bells." He took a deep breath. "Guess I'll mosey out and tell that damn sheep-herder what one cowboy thinks of him."

"Better not, Chuck," Milnor advised. "Won't buy you nothin' but trouble."

"Me and trouble been sort of partners lately. I got no more job'n a rabbit. Nor money."

"You come with me and the old man will give you a ridin' job. We're a real cow outfit. But I'll tell you this, Chuck, we're headin' right smack for a sheep war."

"The way I'm feelin' right now, I crave a sheep war."

The two new friends shook hands.

THEY moved to the street end of the passage. Owen's horse was tied over the way, not far from the Red Steer Bar. As Owen stepped from that narrow crack between buildings, Milnor looked him over and approved. He had red hair and a freckled face. His eyes were a clear blue. He leaned a little forward from the hips as he walked.

Milnor noticed Chuck's pants, shirt, and jacket verged on raggedness, and, as he had a good supply of clothing, decided he would lend Chuck an outfit. The clothes would fit, too. The two of them were a good deal alike, though Milnor's hair was light brown, and his eyes gray with sun wrinkles at the corners of them. Another tie between the cowboys was their sense of humor.

Before the Red Steer, five dust-streaked horses were tied to the hitch rail, the mounts, Milnor thought, of the men who had been brought in to fight for Mundo. Two or three of these men were in sight, moving in an aimless, half-hearted way. Milnor smiled for, if Mundo or his foreman had been around,

there would have been a real man hunt about the settlement of Palma, which did not consist of more than a dozen establishments, mostly saloons.

Owen untied his horse, swung into saddle and backed him to the clear.

The saloon door opened. The man who thrust out his shaggy head and narrow shoulders must have been watching over the tops of the swinging doors. He was the same fellow that had jumped Milnor in the bar.

"Hey, where you goin'?" he demanded of Owen.

"Takin' a ride. Why?" Owen had his hand on his gun butt.

"Aw, nothin'. Don't go far. We're draggin' out pronto." He popped into the saloon.

Milnor smiled, then sobered. Just because this sheep-herder was soft, was no sign Mundo could be bluffed. Quite the contrary. Owen was walking his horse toward the end of town where he was to meet him. Milnor retreated down the dark aisle, picked up his sack of staples and went on to the rear, headed for where his horse was tied in the shade of a tree. He stopped to feel for the flat, flexible package in his shirt bosom and, finding it safe, went on.

A few minutes later he had joined Owen. They urged their horses to a lope and rode in silence. The hoofs of the horses made muffled, plopping sounds in the dust which twisted lazily from the plunging feet of the horses. The smell of dust was in the air. All the world was dusty with drought. The only living vegetation in sight were the mighty live oaks that dotted the landscape and their swelling domes were dust-covered. The chaparral by the roadside was layered so deep with dust that it was impossible to tell if the stuff were living or dead.

In the distance, directly before the two cowboys, was the irregular sky line of a low range of hills which were light in color. Owen remarked on this fact.

"Those are the Tierra Blanca Hills," Milnor explained.

"White earth! Well named."

"The Crowfoot Bench is right plumb ahead of us. We aim to drive our cows over the hills to a plateau just the other side. There's enough feed to see us through the summer. Mundo figures to use that same feed for his sheep."

"Where's his layout, Fred?"

"Just south of us," Milnor said, extending his left hand. "It was always scrub range, chopped up and rocky. At round-up time, had to have a man for every cow so it was abandoned as cow range. Then Mundo moved in and managed to raise sheep. He's been reaching out and now——" Milnor scowled.

"Ain't there any other cowmen to gang up on him?"

"No. The Harper brothers to the south of Mundo drove out early spring. They got troubles of their own."

"What's north of the Crowfoot Bench?"

"A large, healthy desert."

"Goin' to be a nice cozy little war, ain't it?" Owen commented.

"Not so cozy," Milnor returned. "Wait till you see that country we got to drive our cows over." He reined out to avoid a deep patch of dust. "Say, Chuck, what kind of hombres were those other fellers hired as range guards?"

"Didn't see much of 'em," Owen said. "Three of 'em kept together. I got the idee they'd moved north from the border for their health. The other ranny kept lookin' back when ridin'. Seemed scared. Guess he was on the run. The three weren't

regular cowhands, though the scared one was. A pretty tough aggregation, those fellers."

Milnor nodded.

AROUND a bend of the road, they came to a water trough that held no water, only an alligator skin pattern of sediment on the bottom. Behind the trough was a bank covered with a rabble of dry weeds. The ground about was hard and checkered. The two pulled up under the oak that shaded the place.

"When there's water," Milnor said, "the prettiest wild flowers grow here. I miss 'em. There'll be no flowers in the low country this season. They might bloom up on the hills, though."

Owen nodded. "April doesn't seem like April without the flowers." He glanced at the sky which had a brazen quality to it. "Now, it's more like the Fourth of July in hell."

Milnor was thinking of April flowers. He slid a hand inside his shirt to feel for the flat, flexible package that rested there. It was safe.

"If we plug along," he said, "'nother half hour will get us to the home ranch."

They came to a side road which led south and was not much traveled.

"Where's that trail take you?" Owen asked.

"She runs direct south, past Mundo's ranch, past the Harper brothers, and keeps on to the Dulzura country."

"I see dust away, away down it," Owen said.

That was true, Milnor saw, as he squinted his eyes. He didn't say anything.

After a while, Owen said: "S'pose Mundo paid your ranch a visit?"

"Well, Hi Croft is pretty short in the temper. I reckon he'd send Mundo off the place. This war hasn't busted out in the open yet." Milnor looked back and out along the Dulzura road. A group of oaks hid the dust smudge on the road. "Don't figure he'll visit us, though he has more nerve than a brass monkey."

The country became slightly rolling with gentle ups and downs. Live oaks dotted the landscape. There was a flash of metallic blue as a jay, crying its harsh call, flew to a tree.

"Sweet cow country," Owen said, "if there was feed. How often does the drought hit you?"

"Every ten years, I'm told."

They topped a low rise and to the south was the first fence they had met, a new fence, which turned and continued along the road. There was an open space of about twenty rods near the corner. The posts were set and wire lay ready. To finish the job, Milnor had gone to town for the staples. Two riders guarded the opening and, within the fence was a straggling herd, the cows of which extended in distance to the limit of sight.

Milnor rode over and delivered the staples. He said nothing to the two cowboys holding the gap. He felt he must report first to Croft who, he was told, was at the house.

"Them cows look pretty good," Owen said as Milnor rode up.

"The old man intended to hold 'em for a couple of weeks more. We got enough cut feed to do it, but now, I reckon, we'll be moving out. Over that rise ahead"—Milnor pointed—"is the home ranch. You can see the top of the big cottonwood before the house."

The Croft ranch house was a long, low adobe with a shake roof and with a covered porch the length of it. Vines covered the open side of

the porch except before the door. A mighty cottonwood lifted a tower of dull green, other trees grew behind the house and a row of them screened cookhouse, blacksmith shop, other ranch buildings, and the corrals. The bulk of two feed barns loomed in the background.

Two horses were tied to the hitch rail under the cottonwood. Two men sat upon the floor of the low porch and both of them got to their feet as Milnor and Owen approached.

The elder of the two, Hiram Croft, was a tall, broad-shouldered man with a pinched face and piercing, dark eyes. His face was austere, yet kindliness lurked in the lines about his generous mouth. The other man, Bill Reed, the foreman, was small and wiry, with a scar on his right cheek which puckered that eye. The mark of the injury gave an expression of sadness to his whole countenance.

"Git the staples, Fred," Croft greeted the riders. His look was on Owen.

"Took 'em to the boys," Milnor answered and went on to tell what he learned in Palma, including his meeting with Owen. Then Owen told all he knew.

Croft shot in a few quick questions, while his look took in Owen from boots to hat.

"Young feller, strikes me you changed sides mighty easy," he said.

Owen's face flushed and his mouth hardened.

"I figure no explanation is needed to a cowman like you. You give me a better reason to switch than sheep and I'll be obliged. And you can know this, my father was killed in a sheep war."

Croft nodded. "Figure you'll do to take along. This is the foreman, Bill Reed."

Reed took a worn time book from a rear pocket and a pencil stub from a vest pocket.

"You're on the pay roll," he said, sucking the pencil lead.

"Git off, boys," Croft invited. "We got a few things to discuss."

WHEN the arrivals had tied their horses, the four men sat in a line upon the edge of the porch. Hiram Croft's face was bleak. Blotches of red like fever spots burned upon his cheeks. His hard voice softened and little tremors shook it from time to time. He spoke as if he were thinking aloud.

His listeners became aware that the inevitable sheep war was more than a struggle between cowman and sheepman to determine which would survive. The fight must decide whether or not sheep should run the grazing lands of Laguna County, which from the days of the Spaniards had known only the tramp and rustle of beef herds.

Then Mundo came to the scrub lands with a band of sheep that could have been covered with a blanket. The years were good and no man gave heed to Mundo, whose flocks grew by natural increase and by importation until the numbers of them were in the thousands.

Croft paused, looked stormily out into space.

"You said, Fred," he inquired, "that they've started a flock of sheep into the Tierra Blanca?"

"That's right, Hi."

"Just wanted to make sure." Croft was still looking into space.

Milnor heard the faint pounds of distant hoofs, but just then Croft got to his feet. His voice became sharp and incisive as he began to give orders.

"Bill, git your men together," he

told his foreman, "and start the herd t'ards the hills. The critters are all under fence and that helps. I'll send the cook out with grub. We'll have to use pack animals 'cause a chuck wagon can't make it where we'll have to drive. Take this new man with you."

With the first words of his boss, the foreman had made for his horse at the hitch rail. Owen followed him and the two rode off to start the drive.

"Damn the drought," Croft muttered.

The door of the ranch house opened and April Croft stepped out upon the porch. She was a slim, trim girl and every move was one of flowing grace. Her dark hair, always unruly, had its whirls and spirals and curls bound with a white ribbon. In her clear, brown eyes were dancing lights and she smiled gayly.

She wore a new dimity dress with a froth of lace at the neck and at the bottom of the skirt were tucks which reminded Milnor of ripples upon water.

"Mother gave me this dress for my birthday," she said, extending her arms and swung her body so the skirt flowed and folded to ebb back. "How do you like it?"

Milnor smiled his pleasure.

Croft muttered: "Clean forgot," and reached to a back pocket to draw forth a lean leather sack.

He poured out the money into a hand and finally found the single gold piece, a five-dollar coin. He looked at it, and Milnor could read his thought: If the Crowfoot Bench herd did not possess the pasture over the hills, there would be no more money, gold or otherwise, for Hiram Croft.

Again Milnor heard the pounds of hoofs, nearer now, but Croft spoke.

He stepped to his daughter and said: "Many happy returns of the day, my dear," he said and held steady while her arms circled his rugged neck and she kissed him thoroughly.

Milnor reached within the bosom of his shirt and took out the flat package he had guarded. Diffidently, he extended his present to April.

"Hope you'll like her," he said. "Got her in town this morning."

April's hands fluttered over the package, took it and her fingers picked at the string. The paper zigzagged down.

"Oh!" she exclaimed as she unfolded a large neckerchief of a cream color. The material was brocaded silk and under her glad fingers rolled as smoothly as a cloud rolls and folds upon itself. "Why, it's exactly the same pattern as my dress," she cried. "I'm so happy?"

"That's great," Milnor mumbled, confused by her enthusiasm.

Still smiling, April's lips parted to speak, then she turned her face quickly to the east where four horsemen had just topped the rise of ground a hundred yards from the house.

The men stared.

"What the blazes!" Croft uttered huskily. "Mundo!"

CHAPTER II.

STORM CLOUDS GATHER.

MILNOR had recognized Mundo also. One of the sheepman's companions he knew by sight; the other was a stranger. Guitar music, a cascade of small, bright sounds preceded the riders. Mundo rode in the lead, his two men at either flank of his horse. Behind this spearhead rode the musician, a small, wizened Mexican with an unhappy twisted face. His

long prehensile fingers played as swiftly as lizards upon the neck of the guitar. The drought dust lay heavily upon men and horses.

"When did he catch that guitar-playin' monkey?" Croft muttered, then his jaw set and a hard glitter came into his eyes.

April stepped from the porch to stand behind her father.

Milnor placed his hands on his hips and wondered what brought Mundo to the Crowfoot Bench. Croft gave him an inquiring look. The tall cottonwood gently rattled its leaves which, like thousands of fairy castanets, kept time with the song of the guitar.

The four horsemen slowed.

Mundo was a solid man. His face was round, moonlike, bland, and over his heavy upper lip perched a black mustache, the ends of it stiletto-sharp. His legs and arms were round. For a personal reason, he affected a Mexican flavor in his dress. He wore a peaked sombrero with a saucer brim. Stuck in the hat band were several spikes of blue flowers. About his round waist was a red, white, and green striped sash and the folds of it held many things, among them a gun—though he wore a holstered one at hip—and a knife. His Mexican spurs were inlaid with silver. His round eyes were shrewdly calculating.

The man on Mundo's right was as thin as a blade with the same look of steelly hardness. He seemed as incapable of feeling as cold iron. His look never wavered, the expression of his face never changed.

The man on Mundo's left had a short, thick body and long legs. His face was triangular, his nose broad and flat with the nostrils showing and his mouth a tight crescent, down-turned. His eyes were small, beady and continually darted glances all about. The band of his sombrero was the skin of a rattlesnake. A blanket rolled and folded horseshoe fashion lay over his left shoulder sheep-herder style. The front end of it concealed a gun if he wore one.

Mundo's men pulled up a few paces from the cattlemen who remained waiting silently. Mundo advanced.

"Howdy?" he greeted them. His voice was smooth. He pulled his horse in short. The horse's mouth writhed about the Spanish bit. He saw April, and off came his sombrero in a lordly sweep. "Ah!" he exclaimed. "This indeed is the month of flowers." Still looking at her he licked his lips and added after the Mexican fashion, "No?"

He swept his hat back onto his head and three of the blue blossoms were shaken from their spikes.

Milnor's look followed the falling blossoms. They were the blue larkspur, also called *espuela del caballero* —cavalier's spur.

The fever spots upon Croft's cheeks were suns of anger, his hair seemed to bristle.

"What the hell do you want?" burst from him.

Milnor moved out a little so he could see all three men. As long as the guitar music flowed he gave no attention to the little Mexican.

"Nothing, nothing at all," Mundo claimed, smiling blandly. "We were riding near and dropped in to pass the time of day."

That was a lie, pure and simple, Milnor knew, for he remembered the dust on the Dulzura road.

Croft was having difficulty in keeping himself under control. His jaws were tight clamped.

"Just a friendly visit," Mundo continued. He brushed a pants leg and smiled as dust wisps kindled

under his hand. "A friendly visit," he said again and continued to smile as if enjoying a secret joke.

Milnor knew his boss would explode in a moment and already the fingers of his trigger hand were twitching.

"You sheep-herders had better pull your freight," Milnor said quietly.

The three sheepmen stiffened. The smile left Mundo's face. The man with the snakeskin hat band twisted his tight mouth. The thin man remained as he had been.

Croft could contain himself no longer.

"Git, you sheep-runnin' coyotes," he shouted, his voice quavering. "I know you aim to sheep-jump my range. Git, you——"

"Father!" April put both hands upon her father's gun arm, the hand of which was fumbling for gun butt.

MUNDO'S eyes became rounder with surprise. The man with the snakeskin hatband looked quickly at Mundo. The thin man remained impassive.

Milnor's gun flashed from holster to draw down upon the man with the snakeskin hatband.

"Pull your paw from under that blanket end," Milnor snapped.

"Quinn, don't be a fool," Mundo ordered sharply. He recovered and again smiled blandly.

Quinn had jerked his hand to sight.

"Guess we'd better punch the breeze," Mundo said. "Pull around, Slim."

The thin man obeyed.

Milnor watched for any trick.

Mundo looked at April and murmured: "The sweetest April flower I have ever seen."

His sombrero came off in a mocking sweep and was returned to his head. He yanked his horse's head around. Blood showed at the off corner of the animal's mouth.

"Benjaminto, play something gay."

The musician's fingers began to twinkle and began a cascade of small, bright notes.

Mundo reached to his hatband and plucked a spike of the larkspur. This he tossed with a gesture of derision in the direction of Croft.

"You'll never drive your cows over the Tierra Blanca," he called, and laughed in the manner of a man enjoying a secret known only to himself, a secret of evil consequence to Croft.

Milnor watched them go and jammed his gun into the holster.

"Anybody that would use a Spanish bit," he muttered, "is lower'n a ——" Experience failed him.

Black anger slowly drained from Croft's face.

"I was a blame fool," he said hoarsely, "to give away we was wise to 'em."

"They would have found out when they got back to their hole," Milnor said consolingly.

A few thin bars of guitar music came tauntingly back.

Croft was staring at the three blue blossoms upon the ground.

April stooped to pick one up.

"Leave 'em be," Croft ordered. "You'd better go in the house."

The girl flashed a quick, reassuring smile at Milnor, pointed to his gift about her neck, then stepped upon the porch, but did not go into the house. She stood behind the screening vine within easy earshot of the men.

"Damn snoopers," Croft declared. "All they came for, to see what we was up to. They knowed there wouldn't be many of my men hangin' around the house." Again

he spoke as if thinking aloud. "They could see we had our cows under fence ready to move. Now, they'll git their damn' sheep agoin' strong."

Milnor nodded. He was looking at the three larkspur blossoms.

He said: "Mundo must have picked those flowers in the hills. Never seen any below the upper meadows and haven't seen a flower of any kind on the lowlands."

"That's right," Croft agreed, scowling. "The drought kept down the flowers, too." His scowl deepened. "Damn them cow-killin' weeds," he muttered and ground the three blossoms into the earth with a boot heel. "What did he mean about that damn larkspur?" He looked at the spike of flowers.

Milnor shook his head. "So we can figure," he went on with his thought, "that Mundo has been up in the hills."

Croft nodded. "They did sort of look like they been on a picnic," he observed. "Guess I'm kind of thick-headed, Fred."

"You got a lot on your mind," Milnor said. "Want I should go up in the hills, Hi, and look things over? One thing, I could scout out the old trail and see if it's O. K."

"Good idea. That will have to be done." Croft agreed. He counted on his fingers while his lips moved. "We're short of men," he said, "considerin' the kind of country we have to drive over. We got eleven, countin' that new man, Chuck——"

"Owen," Milnor supplied. "And you make a' even dozen."

"Wished you could take a man with you."

"I'd rather go it alone."

"You'll take some grub."

"Sure. And I'll take old Belle."

"Old Belle!" Croft was puzzled. The horse mentioned was an ancient pack animal and not reliable. "You won't need a pack-horse load of grub and you know blame well, Fred, that dog-gone critter always gits loose and high-tails for the home ranch."

"Yeh. That's why I'll take her. She can bring in a message and save me the ride. And you can bet she won't get loose until I let her."

Croft smiled. "That's usin' your head," he remarked and his face became serious in thought. "I got a lot to do," he said, striding to the hitch rail for his horse.

As Milnor went to the rail for his horse he looked at the house and, not seeing April, untied his horse and led him toward the corral to exchange for a fresh mount. April remained concealed for reasons of her own.

Milnor stopped at the cookhouse to tell Marty to put up some grub for him. Marty was a short, heavy man with enormous hands. He had received orders from Croft to pack grub for the drive and was thumping things upon the kitchen table.

"Goin' out alone, huh?"

"Yeh."

"Beans, bread, hunk of cold beef. Wanta onion?"

"Yeh."

"Fix you up in a coupla shakes."

MILNOR went on about his business. He snaked old Belle out of her favorite corner of the corral and threw a blanket and a sawbuck back saddle on her ample back. For his own use he selected a wiry, smokey-blue mare that was as quick as a cat on her feet.

Old Belle moved reluctantly at the end of a lead rope fastened to a hackamore.

"You better come easy or I'll put a slip noose around your fat neck," Milnor threatened her.

Marty helped Milnor. The load consisted of a flour sack half full of grub, a frying pan, coffeepot, two blankets, and an ax. Milnor had a good supply of revolver shells, a carbine strapped under a saddle skirt, and ammunition for the gun.

"Shucks, I could pack that load on one eyebrow," Marty declared, and kicked Belle on her fat rump. "Good luck, cowboy."

Milnor rode past the lower end of the house. No one was in sight. He half hesitated whether or not to hunt up April, but decided not to, for she had thanked him once for his gift and he had no right to expect more. Just the same, he wished he could see her.

But she did see him. She remained behind the screening vine, thinking and twisting the end of her new neckerchief between her fingers. She knew a crisis had come to the Crowfoot Bench. What could a girl do? She still had her problem when Milnor passed from sight around the end of the ranch house.

The oak-dotted land was level for a ways and Milnor saw the herd was being collected, the men working from the west. He rode leisurely, giving a yank on the lead rope once in a while. He rode near the fence, keeping watch for Bill Reed, but he never saw him.

Chuck Owen spotted Milnor and came riding over. Owen was all a-grin, tickled pink with his job. Milnor told him where he was bound.

"Tell Bill," Milnor charged Owen, "I'll scout the old trail. In fact," he added for Owen's information, "it's the only practical way over the hills. "If anything important shows up——" He pointed to old Belle.

Then he went on to tell why he was taking the pack horse. A little more talk and a wild whoop came from the field.

Owen looked. "Guess I'd better move back on the job. So long and good luck, Fred."

"So long."

An hour later, Milnor came to the first rise of the hills, a long, gentle slope where the sparse stubble proved the rains had failed. Up this slope so faint as to be distinguished by none except the most practiced eye was a wide swath where trail herds of the Crowfoot Bench had passed in the years gone.

Milnor looked back upon a dusty world. He had ascended high enough so to be above the tops of the oaks upon the level. The illusion came that the scattered trees had drawn close together to form a carpet of dull green above the dun earth. To the west and south where lay Mundo's scrub range, the land smoked with the drought dust which laid a glaze upon the sky. The afternoon breeze that caused it had not yet reached Milnor. But afar the scant weed stubble changed hue as it moved with the breeze which soon reached Milnor. The first mild gusts of it were like the exhausted pantings of some hot and tired beast. The breeze flowed gently, bringing the smell of dust.

Steadily, Milnor marched his horses upward. He came to where the chaparral began, a timid, scattered vanguard of scrub oaks, sage and thorn, then the brush became thicker, hardier, and the character of the land changed. The idea came to Milnor that, if he were high in air, the land would look as corded and ribbed as the back of an old man's hand. The country was a troubled one. But still clear to a knowing eye was the faintly marked cow trail of other days.

The rising land became more

broken. There were dozens of small gullies, mouths close together, that twisted away. No single one of them was large enough to accommodate more than a few cows abreast. A trail herd would here be led off in parcels through the many gullies and scattered far and wide if the greatest care was not exercised. Such a place was enough to drive a cowman "loco." Milnor scowled as he remembered former drives. A little confusion and the herd would go wild. There were other places ahead just as bad. On the lower reaches of the hills, the feed was scarce and stunted, even the stiff-branched chaparral showed the effect of the drought.

Milnor came to a barren region of small rocks and gravel. Up a little higher the large-leafed black oaks began to appear. The feed was still scarce and all but worthless.

For a little way, the ground was level in an open glade surrounded by oaks. Here, Milnor recalled, wild flowers grew in profusion after the rain. There were no flowers now, nor any sign there ever had been.

Beyond the glade lay the first water, a *cienaga*, a marshy place amid aridness, and here the water oozed from below to moisten a small area of earth and to collect in a shallow pool. The place was a miniature fairyland, though there was neither enough water or feed to care for many head of stock. Milnor smiled at the flowers, the yerba mansa with its large, white blossoms, the clematis that wreathed a clump of chaparral, the small, star-shaped flowers close to earth. He did not linger here, for a half mile further on was a large *cienaga* that covered many acres and where was water in abundance. Or should be. He forced the horses on and up.

And the only way to advance was through a troughlike depression with steep banks. The floor of this trough was level and fairly free of brush. Because of the dense chaparral on both sides, this was the only way a herd could be driven to the crest of the Tierra Blanca and this was the accustomed route.

Impatiently, he urged his horse on, tugged old Belle along. The south bank of the trough became level with the floor and Milnor pulled up, gazed upon a meadow lush with green, sparkling with the blooms of flowers. Pines, those sentinels of high places, grew beyond the meadow and beyond the pines was the crest of the hills, and over the crest was an easy down trail to the pastures which meant salvation for the Crowfoot Bench herd.

Milnor sat rigid in saddle, his look upon a band of blue that lay clear across the upper expanse of the meadow. The rays of the sun passed through the pines to fall upon this streak of vivid blue. Milnor's look was frozen upon this blue death which guarded the way.

CHAPTER III.

OLD BELLE STRAYS.

THE sun dropped slowly and its lingering light seemed to intensify the blue of the larkspur. Milnor could visualize the Crowfoot Bench herd, hungry and thirsty after two days of hard climbing, rushing with avidity upon the green forage of the *cienaga*. They would devour the 'filaree, the wild oats, the bunch grass, and the larkspur. And every cow that ate a hatful of the blue blossoms and leaves of the plant would die as surely as water ran downhill.

The cowboy estimated the poison plant covered two acres or more.

All the hands of the Crowfoot Bench could not grub out the stuff in less than a week. A week! And within twenty-four hours Mundo's woollies would be on the march. The stuff could not be burned.

He allowed the lead horse more rope so the old beast could graze. There were no larkspur close by. The stuff was as poisonous to horses as to cows. But not to sheep. Sheep ate larkspur with no ill effect, thrived on it. Milnor smiled slowly.

Came to his mind the scene before the Crowfoot Bench ranch house and Mundo slyly enjoying a joke known only to himself and his men. Mundo had worn spikes of the larkspur in his hatband. He knew of the blue barrier of death. The meaning of the exasperating, taunting smile on Mundo's round face was clear to Milnor.

Sheep could be driven where it was impossible to work cows. Sheep, being small, could wriggle and twist through dense chaparral; they were almost as fluid in movement as water, could go anywhere their sharp-cutting hoofs found purchase.

There was just one thing to do. As a start, Milnor dismounted and tied old Belle to a thick root. He took from the pack saddle the grub, blankets, cooking utensils, and the ax. He took enough of the cooked grub, beans, meat, and bread for two meals and rolled the supply in a blanket. The rest of the provisions he rolled in the second blanket and cached in the fork of a scrub oak. Then he wrote out a report on paper of the conditions he had found and told what he intended to do. Concerning his own plan, he could not be definite; it was all problematical, unknown. All he could do was to attempt a certain course.

The note finished, he folded it within another paper and tied the packet to a horn of the pack saddle. He unloosed the lead rope from old Belle's hackamore and the horse was free. Milnor made no attempt to start Belle on her way, but turned his back and went about his business.

Old Belle reached her mouth for a luscious stand of bunch grass. She had tried for the same morsel and failed just before the man had taken the lead from her pack saddle. Now, she could reach the morsel. She felt no restraining tug of the rope. She raised her head and leisurely munched the nip she had plucked. The man was some distance away. The old horse took a short step, swinging away from the man and again nipped at a grass clump, but got only three blades. Boldly, she turned and faced down the chute. Pretending to nibble, she took several short steps. The man went to his horse.

Belle reached her forelegs, walked faster and faster, looked back at the man, then broke into a running walk. Her ears were erect, her tail humped a little as she broke into a lumbering lope. No war horse after victory ever paced as proudly as old Belle.

She continued to back-trail along the way she had been led. She made good time and, when the twilight was giving place to the first shade of night, she came to a place of many narrow, twisting gullies. Here she hesitated and sniffed. There was old scent in the air and new scent. The old scent had been left by Belle, the other horse, and the man and laid along the gully that lay before her. The new scent was carried by the wind along a gully that came in from Belle's right, the south. This new scent was interesting, brought news of strange horses, horses which

Belle had never known on the Crowfoot Bench.

She caught the old scent and bobbed her head. The breeze aroused to bring the new scent fat and strong, and another smell, that of oats. Old Belle would do anything for oats which were denied because she was not worthy of trust. She sniffed long and deep, took a short step and sniffed. She moved into the south gully, lured by the strong, fascinating scent. Old Belle was a loafer and a gossip; besides, she loved oats. She wrinkled her nose, stepped along. She increased her walk along the winding gully. After a quarter of a mile, the gully widened. The smell of oats was strong.

Two horses under saddle, bridles off, were tossing nosebags made of gunny sacks. At each saddle cantle was tied a large roll, slicker-wrapped. Two men squatted near a new-made heap of small wood. A fry pan filled with beans stood with a coffeepot near by. One man scratched a match on his pants, waited until the sulphur burned away, then applied the flame to the shavings under the wood. The kindling caught, a jet of smoke rushed upward, and the growing flame dissolved the shadows of night. The saddled horses, the chaparral, the ground became awash with light.

"Listen!" one man uttered.

The other man arose silently and drew his gun.

BOTH of them peered in the same direction. The horses tossed their heads in endeavor to corral the last oat grains. The smoke blurred the light above the fire. The shadows danced with the wavering fire flickers.

The two men were motionless, tense. They were wiry fellows with hard faces. And they were hard men who asked no odds of life. Both stood side by side, guns ready. Their sombreros, vests, pants, and boots showed much wear.

The guns raised. Both stared into the shadows beyond the firelight.

"Hoss," breathed one man. "Saddled."

"Pack saddle," corrected the other as old Belle paced nearer.

"Stray, I guess."

Belle stretched out her head, wrinkled her nose at the horses, then whinnied.

"Take it easy, Jack."

They watched the old horse.

"Put some oats in your hat, Monte. We can use a pack horse." He glanced at the large and inconvenient rolls on the saddles of their horses.

Quietly, Jack moved back to where lay a gunny sack a quarter full of oats. He put a double handful of the grain into the crown of his hat, then walked out to stand beside the head of his own horse. He held out the hat.

Old Belle sniffed, advanced one foot, hesitated and sniffed again.

"Come on, hoss."

Belle started slowly.

Jack extended his arm and the hat.

Belle came on sniffing until she was within reach of the hat. She plunged in her nose and munched. The man rubbed behind her off ear.

Monte came up. "There's the Crowfoot Bench brand on her shoulder."

"That ain't surprisin'," Jack said.

"No, guess not," Monte agreed. "But it means the Crowfoot Bench outfit have sent several men up this way. One man or two wouldn't need a pack horse. Looks to me as——"

"What's that tied to the saddle prong?" Jack cut in.

"A paper," Monte said after investigating. He cut the strings with his pocketknife and released Milnor's message. "Two papers," he said. "The inside one has writin' on it." He hastened to the fire, spread out the note and read. "Come here, Jack, we've horned in on sump'in'," he called excitedly.

Jack shook out his hat, clapped it on his head, released old Belle and hastened to join his companion.

The two men bent over the note. Jack read slowly, his lips moving as he spelled out the words. He finished reading.

"One man wrote and initialed this letter 'F. M.,'" he said. "He don't say nothin' 'bout other fellers."

"One man generally writes a letter," Monte pointed out. "Hell's ginger, Jack, no use chewin' the fat over how many fellers are up there. We got to take this here letter to Mundo."

Jack thought that over and nodded.

"Might as well," he said. "We gotta camp here 'cause we're lost. Our horses are Mundo horses so all we gotta do is head 'em back and they'll make tracks for the home ranch."

Monte snorted. "Course we can back trail," he stated. "Always. If we couldn't, we wouldn't be in the land of the livin' now. It was luck we snared that horse, else we might have bumped into heavy trouble. There's only two of us."

"An' hell knows how many of them," Jack said, shaking the note. "It's a cinch one man couldn't do alone what this 'F. M.' feller says is a goin' to be done."

"That's right," Monte agreed. "Well, let's tie into the grub and git gone."

Ten minutes sufficed for the preparation and consumption of the beans, bread, and coffee.

Jack wiped his hands on his pants.

"We gotta be sure this fire is out," he said, starting to scuff dirt with a foot upon the embers. "You got that letter safe, Monte?"

"Yes. Buttoned it in a shirt pocket where it'll be safe until we get to Mundo. Take us to midnight to make it to him." He looked around. "Where's that damn pack horse?" he demanded.

Search proved to them the old pack horse had disappeared as mysteriously as she came.

"No use chasin' her," Monte said. "I'll bet she was turned loose to take that letter home." He chuckled. "When she shows up, they'll think she just got loose."

"Let's mosey."

After smothering the last ember of the fire, the two men who, hired with others to guard range, set out for Mundo's home ranch.

A half mile away, ambling along, old Belle headed for the home corral, grateful for a few mouthfuls of oats.

MILNOR made the best progress he could through the failing daylight. By keeping close to the line where the pines grew, he found comparatively open ground, though rough. The chaparral did not grow under the pines. Milnor worked south, toward Mundo's ranch and kept to high places where he could look down. He was looking for a camp fire. Darkness came when he had advanced three or four miles on his search. The ridge turned to the east to form a vast cup in the southerly extent of the Tierra Blanca. Somewhere in this cup was the object he sought, a sheep-herder's camp.

A little breeze drifted lazily from the south. Milnor could make out objects close at hand, but beyond all was shadow. He knew that below him was a down slope upon which the chaparral lessened with descent. The sheep camp he suspected was somewhere upon the lower reaches of this slope. That is, if Mundo had started a flock in advance.

He headed the horse in the way he wanted her to go and many times blessed his foresight in selecting the sure-footed little mare. They twisted and turned through the chaparral. The mare bunched her feet and slid down steep banks; she got through and around somehow. All about them was darkness and peril. Not a single spark of any camp fire could Milnor spy. He continued in a southwesterly direction and down grade.

They had descended to the region of black oaks. The mare halted, pricked her ears and pointed her head down wind, sniffing deeply. Fully alert, Milnor urged her on. She turned. He brought her back. She turned the other way. She did not want to go down wind. He forced her that way.

Milnor called upon all his senses. He watched the mare. He made her go slowly and she didn't like it; she didn't like the smell which the wind brought to her. Milnor tried to catch it, but it was too faint for his nostrils. He kept a firm hold on the reins, desiring to have the horse make no sound.

A scent came to Milnor. He pulled in, closed his eyes, and inhaled slowly through his nose. Not until he was absolutely sure did he allow himself to know he smelled wood smoke. He put the mare on a walk directly down wind. Strain his eyes as he would, he could see no glimmer of a fire, no point of light in the dense darkness.

The mare advanced reluctantly. Milnor decided to circle, for the mare's actions combined with the smell of smoke convinced him a flock of sheep were down wind and at no great distance. He loosed his gun in its holster, not as a precaution for its use against the sheep-herder, but against the sheep dogs which might attack. No sheep could be walked in that country without dogs.

Milnor continued his wide circle. The mare became easier and the going better. The chaparral was sparse as was usual at that level of the hill. Then Milnor saw the fire, no more than a faint, semicircular glow in the darkness. He was puzzled as to why he had not seen the glow from high ground, but the explanation came as he neared the fire which was built against the straight face of a towering boulder.

As he and the mare were now down wind from the sheep, their scent was carried on. The first sign was a sharp bark immediately followed by another. Milnor went cautiously, for the sheep-herder could not know who approached. He might be armed or not. Sheep-herders were not, as a rule, expert with firearms. Nor would the dogs attack until ordered.

Milnor advanced at a slow walk. A tall form, leaning on a staff, was outlined against the face of the boulder. And behind the waiting sheep-herder on the boulder face was his enormous shadow that quivered and made fitful starts to right or left in time with the dancing flames. The shadow was a giant jinni, quivering with eagerness to dart forth upon the horseman, but held in check by his motionless master. The menacing shadow was a magnification

showing in exaggerated detail the rumpled hat, the sheepskin cape, an end of the rope pants belt, the ragged outlines of the wide buskins about the man's calves. All in a cave of light.

Milnor advanced and pulled up before the fire. The sheep-herder's dark face was ruddy in the glow. It was a lean face with high forehead, high cheek bones, thin lips, and a pointed chin. The large eyes did not blink, remained impassive.

On either side of Milnor, just at the edge of light, stood a sheep dog —large animals they were, more like wolves than dogs. The hair on their necks was raised, their eyes blazed with greenish light. Each had a forepaw raised.

Milnor's right hand was near his gun. He saw the sheep-herder had no firearm, at least, none was in sight. His visible possessions were a blanket, a fry pan, a coffeepot, and a bulging grub sack. The man was his own pack horse.

"*Buenos noches, amigo,*" Milnor greeted the Mexican.

"*Buenos noches, señor,*" replied the sheep-herder softly as if not sure of his own voice.

"I would like to talk with you."

"Talk with me?"

"About sheep. Talk to your dogs, I am getting out of saddle."

"*Tus, tus, reposa,*" ordered the sheep-herder.

The dogs crouched on their bellies. Both watched Milnor.

Milnor took his reata from the horn and knotted it in the mare's bridle ring. He couldn't take any chance of the mare's bolting. He swung from saddle and walked closer to the fire, holding the rope.

"You are walking your sheep over the Tierra Blanca?"

The Mexican hesitated, laid down his staff, and scratched his thigh.

"*Si, señor.*"

"When will you reach the summit?"

The Mexican was staring at Milnor's horse. Milnor did not turn or he might have seen the Mexican's gaze was on the Crowfoot Bench brand.

The Mexican scratched his leg, dropped his hand to scratch his knee. His hand went behind his knee. His arm jerked up, a knife blade gleamed as his hand swung over his shoulder. The knife shot through the air.

CHAPTER IV.

SHEEP AND TALK.

MILNOR swung his body. He felt the wind of the knife on his cheek, heard the hiss of it. His gun covered the Mexican.

"You have no luck," he said. "That is because I have it all." The Mexican was dazed, his mouth open. "Talk to your dogs," Milnor ordered.

The animals had risen to their haunches.

"*Tus, tus, reposa,*" the sheep-herder managed to get out and motioned to the dogs. He composed his face somewhat. "You—you will keel me?"

"Not if you do what you're told."

"What do you desire, señor?"

"Walk your sheep to a pasture that I will show you."

The sheep-herder considered.

"You are a vaquero. No?"

"Yes, I'm a cowboy."

The sheep-herder thought.

The flames were dying down. The shadow on the boulder face was dimmer, quieter. From the shadows of night at the left of the boulder came a soft rustling and infrequently the baa-ing of sheep. Once a bell tinkled. Milnor could not see the flock,

but the smell of sheep was plain in the air, not subdued by the wood smoke.

The sheep-herder broke silence to say: "You will not hurt my sheeps?" He waited anxiously.

That was a poser for Milnor. The sheep must be destroyed or run out of the country.

"I'll do my best," was the only promise Milnor could make.

The sheep-herder hung his head in thought. He looked at the coffeepot.

"Coffee?" he asked, bending for the pot.

Milnor was hungry, longed for coffee.

"*Si, si,*" he replied. "Don't your dogs guard the sheep?"

The sheep-herder nodded. "Ho, Remo," he cried, "ho, Fiel, *vaga, vaga!*" The coffeepot swung from his right hand as he waved his arms.

The dogs got up and started away, looking back over their shoulders.

Milnor noticed they separated, going in opposite directions so as to encircle the resting flock.

"I go for water," said the sheep-herder.

Milnor thrust his gun into the holster and watched the sheep-herder stride toward the darkness. The sheepskin cloak flapped about his shoulders. He swung around an oak to disappear in the shadows. The dogs came back, looked around and sniffed. One lowered his head and followed the sheep-herder's trail to the oak, sniffed into the shadows, then trotted back whining. He went to his companion and the dogs touched noses.

From the night, in the direction taken by the sheep-herder, came a snapping of brush, a crash, silence for three breaths and again a snapping of stiff limbs. Milnor, with his mind's eye, could see the lanky sheep-herder fleeing headlong, plunging through the chaparral in his haste. He didn't blame the Mexican. Loyalty was a rare quality. He thought the sheep-herder, if he didn't break a leg, would reach Mundo's home ranch an hour after midnight.

The two dogs heard the sounds of their master's flight. One ran to the oak to disappear in the night. The other waited, forepaw raised. His ears pointed to the oak. The dog beyond the oak howled. His companion pointed his nose to the sky and started a moaning howl which rose higher and broader to send shivers up and down Milnor's spine. The howl ended in a wail. The other dog appeared, ran to his companion and they touched noses. Both dogs sat down and howled.

"Ho, Remo. Ho, Fiel. *Vaga, vaga!*" Milnor called sharply and gestured in the direction of the flock.

Both dogs got to their four feet and faced the cowboy. The fire glow was reflected in green light from their eyes. Their hackles bristled, their lips were drawn back in a soundless snarl, exposing gleaming fangs.

"*Vaga, vaga!*" Milnor repeated.

The dogs turned slowly. They sniffed in the direction taken by the sheep-herder. The soft breeze must have brought his scent. Together, they took a few steps toward the oak, then together they turned toward the flock and went slowly to make their appointed rounds of guardianship.

Milnor nodded. He knew the dogs would not leave the flock, that they would hold steadfast to their trust, they would guard the sheep even to bitter death. They might never give

affection to their new overlord, for affection was not expected of them, but they would obey his orders to care for the flock. Milnor smiled sadly.

He took the grub sack from his saddle and set about to prepare a meal. Under a corner of the blanket he found the sheep-herder's canteen, which was full. Marty had been generous. The chunk of cold beef was large. Milnor cut off two slices.

"Remo, Fiel, *aqui, aqui!*" he called, and waited with the meat in hand.

When the dogs appeared, he approached them, walking quietly, but not hesitating. He held out the pieces of meat. The dogs sniffed. Milnor took one more step and halted. The dogs sniffed. Their lips were curled, their hackles raised, and they came stealthily. Milnor tossed the meat. The dogs caught it in air, gulped it hungrily and licked their chops. The hair on their backs was smooth. Their lips no longer curled. They looked to Milnor for another tidbit.

"*Vaga, vaga!*" he ordered, extending an arm.

The dogs trotted willingly to see that all was well with the flock. Milnor went to build up the fire. He knew he had two faithful helpers which would aid him with the drive.

Twigs at the edge of the embers caught fire and uprose a flame that wavered and twisted. Alternating ripples of light and shadow flowed upward on the face of the boulder. Milnor watched the illusion and thought it were no stranger that water should flow uphill than that a cowboy should turn sheep-herder.

From the direction of the flock sounded three silvery tinkles of a sheep bell.

MUNDO ceased speaking, shot keen, quick glances in turn at Quinn and Slim and reached for the whisky bottle. He poured a drink and thumped the bottle upon the table, looked over a shoulder to the clock upon the long mantel shelf.

"Midnight," he remarked. "You fellers got anything to suggest?"

The thin man yawned. Quinn reached for his glass. Mundo snatched a crane fly that swung about the lamp with its long legs dangling. The creature looked like a gigantic mosquito. Mundo crushed it between hand and table top.

Quinn stood up. His heavy-lidded eyes were half closed.

"It's all settled then," he said. "We start in the mornin' like you said, Clem, and have the herders walk all the sheep up into the hills. We go ahead and organize them range guards and wait at the meadow for Croft's herd to show up. We stampede the cows in the chute."

"That's 'bout it," Mundo agreed. "We can work out details later. Too bad we can't watch the fun there'd be with the larkspur if Croft wasn't wise to us."

"Say, what herder did you start with the flock that's goin' ahead to break trail?" Quinn asked.

"Juan."

"Oh, the Mexican with them two big dogs he calls Remo and Fiel?"

"Sure."

"He may be a good herder, but he ain't no fighter," Quinn said.

"We ain't dependin' on our sheep-herders to do our fighting, are we, Slim?"

Slim looked at his boss. "No," he replied, got from his chair and turned on his heel.

"Talkative razoo, ain't he?" Quinn commented as Slim, boot heels click-

ing on the bare floor, entered a doorway at the far end of the room.

Mundo grunted.

"We'd better hit the hay," Quinn said and stood up.

Mundo scowled and poured a drink.

"Go on if you want to," he said.

Quinn left him.

Mundo looked about the room which was large, bleak, untidy and entirely masculine. The furniture was rough, most of the chairs had been broken and repaired. A bench at the fireplace end of the room held a miscellany of clothing, boots, and saddle gear. Against the wall behind Mundo stood a cot and the mounded blanket revealed a form beneath, a thin form. On a chair at the head of the cot lay a guitar. There was no attempt at decoration in that room, no curtains at the windows. The door was half open through which night-flying insects entered, attracted by the lamplight.

Mundo was not pleased that Croft had discovered his plan. Now, he must fight. He did not object to battle, but it was inconvenient. With his sheep holding the range over the Tierra Blanca hills, it would have been fun to see Croft try to save his herd from the larkspur. Mundo knew that most of Croft's men would be needed to handle the cows. There would be a race between sheep and cows. His flocks could attain the pastures without crossing the meadow where the larkspur grew. Those plants so poisonous to cows he still considered an ace in the hole.

There was a stirring and a soft moan behind Mundo. He turned and looked at the cot.

"Benjaminto, are you awake?"

In a moment came a soft, "*Si.*" Benjaminto sat up. "I have a—a ——" He fumbled for the English equivalent of *sueno* and found it. "I have a bad dream."

Mundo scowled. "What was it?"

"I lose all my sheep."

"How?"

"I don't know." He did know, but the details were horrifying. He turned his face from Mundo's gaze. "I don't know," he repeated.

"Dreams don't mean nothin'," Mundo asserted.

Benjaminto did not answer. Dreams meant a great deal in Mexico. He wished he were back there with his sheep. Conditions were no worse there than here, as much drought, as much feed. Truly, he brought his sheep of his own free will, but, once on Mundo's range, he felt trapped. He was no longer a sheep owner; he was a guitar player. The fact that Mexican sheep were on American range must be kept secret, Mundo claimed, and all men thought that Mundo owned all the sheep. And now he, Benjaminto Jesus Maria Montez y Montemira, with the blood of old Castilian grandees in his blood, must accompany the big Americano everywhere and play the guitar for him. The music soothed him.

"Play something," Mundo ordered, still regarding the little Mexican.

BENJAMINTO sighed to himself and slid his thin legs from under the blanket. He would play his best. Perhaps, the big man would sleep. Benjaminto searched for his pants. The sheath which carried a thin-bladed knife inside his pants met his fingers. The feel of it gave him a little confidence. He swung the pants to within reach of his feet. The sheath and its knife slid down a pants leg to clatter upon the floor.

Mundo got up, came to the cot and picked up the knife.

"You better gimme this," he said. "You might hurt yourself." He took the knife and returned to his chair.

The little Mexican's twisted face became sadder than usual. He decided he must play exceedingly well. He reached for his boots.

Mundo slid the knife under his belt and winked at the lamp.

Benjaminto reached for his guitar, began to tune it. As his slender fingers busied themselves at the task, he thought of Juan, his best herder, wondered where he was. He thought of the rolling lands of Sonora and longed for them.

"Play somethin' sort of sad, Benjaminto."

"*Ah, si, si, señor,*" Benjaminto agreed and began with a soft minor chord.

The music flowed and Mundo lay back in his seat, eyes closed. He felt rested. He began to doze and gave a start every time his head sank to touch the back of the chair. Benjaminto's pliable fingers moved as easily as a snake slides among weeds, and the music had in it the quality of flowing water. The little Mexican began to nod, caught in his own spell. The beat of hoofs aroused him. He played a little louder. The hoofbeats came nearer, ceased before the door. Benjaminto strummed on.

Two men appeared in the doorway, halted there.

Mundo awoke with a jerk, his hand dropped to gun butt as he half stood; he peered at the newcomers.

"Aw, it's you, huh?" he growled, recognizing the pair as two of his new hired range guards. "Thought you went up in the hills?"

"We had to come back," Jack said, pointing to Monte, who was fumbling at his shirt pocket.

Monte produced a folded paper with which he advanced to Mundo.

Mundo unfolded Milnor's note and spread it out under the lamp. He turned the paper right side up and began to read. When he had finished, he motioned to Benjaminto to cease playing.

"So that damn cowboy thinks he's goin' to steal my sheep to eat off the larkspur?" Mundo laughed harshly. "How come you got this?" he demanded.

Monte told of the pack horse, but he embellished the truth by saying the horse was captured after a long chase.

"And there must be three or four Crowfoot Bench men up there or there would be no need of a pack horse," he concluded.

"Sounds reasonable," Mundo said. "There's me and Slim and Quinn and you fellers," he went on, keeping tally on his fingers, "and we can scrape up a few more men. We're ridin' soon's it's light enough." He licked his lips. "We'll sure give them Crowfoot Bench buzzards a surprise party." He brought a fist down upon the note. "Steal my sheep, will they?"

Through the doorway straggled a lank, unkempt man with a sheepskin about his shoulders. His patched clothes bore fresh brush tears. He was sweaty and dusty. He blinked in the light of the lamp.

"Juan!" Benjaminto cried.

"Don Benjaminto!" responded the sheep-herder and followed a rush of Spanish.

Mundo let Juan talk himself out, listening carefully. He questioned him regarding the appearance of the lone cowboy, but what conclusion he came to he kept to himself.

"Benjaminto, take this man to the kitchen and feed him," he directed.

The little Mexican, glad of the chance to talk with his best sheepherder, obeyed. Master and man left the room.

Mundo watched them go and thought that, if in the coming fracas with the cowmen, a bullet cut down Benjaminto, no one would be the wiser or could do anything about it.

He turned to Monte and Jack.

"We'll go ahead just the same, one man or more," he said. "You boys get a couple hours shut-eye."

APRIL CROFT sat in the open doorway of the deserted bunk house. She wore overalls, boots and a short jacket. Milnor's present was knotted about her neck. Hands clasped about her knees, she leaned back, eyes gazing up to the starry expanse of the sky. Came to her the sounds of the night, insect voices, hoot of owls, stamp of hoofs from the horse corral, subdued rustling of leaves. She waited patiently for the intrusion of another sound, that of the steady falls of old Belle's hoofs.

She did not know whether or not the old horse would show up. Her father asked her to keep watch, though he did not tell her to stay up all night to do so. He told her the old horse might bring a message from Milnor and that she knew, having overheard Milnor's plan. The Crowfoot Bench herd was bedded down where the hills began to rise and Belle might turn up there, though it were possible she would sneak around to avoid any possibility of being put to work. The horse might not show up at all. But still April kept faithful watch. The time, she thought, was near midnight.

She did not know when she first became aware of the measured tread of hoofs. She remained as she was, listening. She did not doubt old Belle was approaching, an event which to her was assured since Milnor had left with the horse. She fingered the silk neckerchief and smiled.

The hoofs stumped closer; April looked along the open space that led to the various ranch buildings and saw an indistinct form in the darkness. She reached inside the bunk-house door for a shallow pan that held a measure of oats.

She advanced with the pan.

"Here, Belle; come here," she said. She could see the old horse now.

The horse stopped and sniffed. April advanced with the pan. Belle stuck her nose in the pan and sighed happily. April put the pan on the ground and went to the bunk house for a lantern. She examined the pack saddle from end to end, top to bottom; she took off the saddle and searched the blanket; she looked over Belle's mane and tail. There was no note. Either something was wrong or old Belle had escaped, she concluded.

This was tougher than she expected. She led the pack horse to the corral and selected a saddle horse. There wasn't much choice, for the best of them had been taken for the drive. Such was her faith that she had already made some preparation for the ride she intended to make. When the horse was saddled, she tied to the saddle horn a salt bag half full of shells for the heavy rifle she intended to carry. She had a six-gun belted about her. The belt was so large she had had to loop the leather upon itself and bind it. She had a dozen sandwiches, too.

Her plan was to ride to the crest of the Tierra Blanca and search for Milnor to see if all was well. She

did not intend to tell anybody her plan. If her father knew of it, he would send her home. There was a score to settle with her father. She knew he secretly wished she had been a boy. She would prove she was as valuable as any boy, therefore she would avoid the bedded-down herd. If the worst came to the worst, she could ride back for help.

It did not occur to her that events could move so fast there would be no opportunity to ride back. She set firmly that rounded little jaw of hers and rode forth into the night, the heavy rifle balanced across the saddle.

CHAPTER V.

DUST UPON THE PLAIN.

MILNOR had the faculty common to all outdoor men of awakening at any time of the morning he chose. He awoke, yawned once, rubbed his eyes, and sat up from his blanket close to the base of the boulder. The fire had long since died out. He looked over the fire to where he had tethered the mare and saw her faint outline. Day had not started to break. In the east was the first faint gray of dawn. Milnor reached under his folded coat for his boots. He folded the coat with the blanket. The vest would be enough to wear.

When Milnor began to stir about, Remo trotted up. The dog gave no sign of friendliness nor did the man. He cut a slice from the chunk of cold meat and tossed it to the dog.

"Go tell Fiel," he said.

Remo gulped his meat, stared at Milnor, who had turned his back, then trotted away. In a minute or two, Fiel came to get his share. All Remo had to do to convey the message was let Fiel sniff his muzzle. Milnor began to suspect that the real sheep-herders were the dogs; that the man only gave direction.

Gradually, light sifted in from the east to turn gray the blackness of night. By the time Milnor had boiled coffee and eaten breakfast there was enough light to see clearly. He saw his horse was all right and went to inspect the sheep. He walked around the boulder and past a thicket of chaparral.

The flock had bedded in an open space. The animals had already begun to stir, though most of them lay where they had slept. Their fleece was dirty and held leaves and twigs snarled in the wool. The general untidiness and dirtiness of the creatures caused Milnor to frown. And the expression of their long faces was so "dog-gone dumb," he thought. The flock did not occupy a large space for the animals were huddled close. Milnor estimated their number as seven hundred. If he had been figuring cows, he would have been accurate. He missed the sheep count by a hundred head.

A bell tinkled, silvery and clear. Milnor spotted the bellwether, an immense animal, that stood at the opposite end of the flock. This sheep had one crumpled horn and the cheek opposite had sustained a long cut which on healing had puckered the eye so the expression of the face was leering and piratical, also gave the impression of wisdom.

The dogs were on duty, one on either side of the flock. When Milnor appeared, they looked to him expectantly as soldiers might at the advance of an officer. Milnor gave no heed to them but returned to saddle his horse and break camp.

He watered the mare and the dogs, using all the water in the sheep-herder's canteen. He looked over the sheep-herder's grub sack

and found beans, bacon, and flour, which things he abandoned.

The sun was not yet up when Milnor sat in saddle ready for the sheep drive. The mare did not like the sheep and the sheep were afraid of the horse. The nearest ones rippled away, compacting the flock. Milnor drew back from the sheep. Saddle height gave him a better field of vision than he could have on foot. His high-heel boots were not suited to walking nor could he abandon the mare. He would walk the sheep from horseback and the sheep could like it or lump it. Fear of the horse would speed them on, which was what Milnor wanted. The distance directly to the meadow was four or five miles or could be ten, according to conditions met.

There was need of speed. The sheep-herder had gone for help. Of course, there was a chance that by accident he had been stopped from reaching Mundo, but Milnor put no faith in that. He figured the sheepmen would arrive within an hour, two at most. So he had a race and the best he could hope for was to get the flock into a position whence it could be started for the meadow. Under the best of conditions, he could not hope to get the sheep there before noon.

He shouted to the dogs and waved his arms; he rode closer to the flock. Remo rushed in, barking and nipping at the belled leader. Fiel scampered back and forth at the rear, rushing at laggards. The bell tinkled rapidly, the flock began to shuffle onward with much baa-ing and confusion. The dogs barked continually as they raced about forcing strays into the line of march. Gradually, order came. The flock rippled on as a unit and the dogs quieted. Milnor remembered the sheep-herder carried a staff, one use of which was to give direction to the dogs. He took the carbine from its boot to use for that purpose.

At the height of the hills where were the sheep was the beginning of the brush line, not regular, but scalloped. The going for the sheep was best here and the best speed could be made, but Milnor had to drive the flock to the crest. He hoped he could find some natural clearing leading upward.

The east was rosy, the morning sky a clear, transparent blue and there was no mist to obscure any part of the land. Milnor looked ahead and up to the rising land which was rounded softly in folds and hollows like a blanket spread carelessly. The covering chaparral was green, though dull, and it was a defiant green, as if the brush flourished its color in the face of the drought. Milnor raised his look to the undulating crest of the hills and there he could distinguish the bristling pines, guardians of the heights.

HE looked down slope, over the barren first rise of it, out to the valley floor where the live oaks stippled the plain, over the wide valley to far, far hills with heavy shadows on their western side. The summits of them were sharp against the glory of the coming dawn. A band of light edged the tops of them. Look as he would, he could see no dust upon the plain that would betray movement. He breathed easier.

He harried the sheep, urged the dogs to hurry them. The dogs were puzzled at first, but finally they caught the contagion of speed. Milnor desired to give the sheep no chance to browse. The scantness of forage was an aid here. Ahead lay a tongue of chaparral that thrust

down slope. To go around it meant loss of time.

Milnor rose in stirrups.

"*Vaga; vaga!*" Go; go!" he shouted, and pointed with the carbine.

The dogs got it. Remo came around behind the flock to join Fiel on the open side to keep the sheep from walking that way. The bellwether, his bell a-jingle, marched to the brush and into it. The flock followed and slipped through the brush as easily as quicksilver through the teeth of a comb. Milnor smiled.

Remo began to bark in a different key. He ran barking to Milnor, then back into the chaparral. Milnor left his horse and worked into the chaparral. A young ewe had become stuck in a fork of a limb and hadn't sense enough to back out. Milnor freed the animal, which dashed to rejoin her companions. The flock was in the clear again. And to show where it had passed, the points of twigs held small pennants and wisps of fleece.

Ahead on the hillside was an outcropping of rock which rose sharply from the dense chaparral. Milnor used the outcrop as a landmark to tell progress. Milnor was making excellent time, better than he knew. He gave the dogs water from his canteen and urged them on. The sharp hoofs of the sheep churned the dust.

The edge of the sun's shining disk topped the eastern mountains and its first slice of light struck the guardian pines on the crest above Milnor. The sky was the color of gold. The shadows on the far mountains were blue. Down the hillside above Milnor flowed the light. Lances of it struck through the chaparral. Shadows sprang to the western side of objects. The sun hung above the far mountains as if to make sure its glory reached all the earth, then began to float into the sky on the journey of the day. All that remained of night was shadow.

Milnor looked down. His gaze swept from north to south. Below him on the plain, and slightly to his rear in the direction of Mundo's ranch, was a tiny cloud of dust shaped like a V lying on its side. He had to shade his eyes with his hands to make sure. The tiny banner covered ground so slowly yet he knew its movement was the speed of a loping horse. Nor could he be sure he could see the riders whose streaming dust proclaimed them. In imagination, he did see them—Mundo, Quinn, Slim, others, doubtless.

The enemy had the advantage that they knew the land and its peculiarities better than Milnor. He looked up the slope and saw he had almost come opposite to his landmark, the outcropping of rock. Ahead, the ground gave signs of being broken and rougher, more rolling. He looked to the plain and could find no dust there. He concluded the enemy had begun the ascent of the hills.

Milnor knew he must reconnoiter. He allowed the flock to draw ahead, at the same time reining down the slope away from them. He began a long circle to take him ahead of the flock. Remo saw his maneuver and dropped back to take Milnor's place.

The enemy would arrive in position to attack in an hour at most.

He swung back to the brush line. Over a small rise, he came to a wash that came down through the chaparral. It was not wide and the bottom of it was stony. Milnor was reminded of the chute running into the larkspur meadow. He could not

see where this wash led except up the slope. The wash might turn out to be a trap with retreat the only escape. He decided to risk it. He took a stand on the far side and waited for the flock.

The tinkle of the leader's bell announced the approach of the flock. The bellwether appeared atop the rise and marched solemnly down into the wash, began to march up the shallow bank. He found the mare barring his way and turned to go ahead of her. He tried the opposite tack and Milnor backed the horse. The sheep stood nonplussed. The flock halted. Milnor called for Remo. The dog came bounding, knowing something was wanted because the flock had halted.

"*Vaga; vaga!* Go; go!" the man commanded, pointing with the carbine up the draw.

REMO, a forepaw raised, ears pointed, tongue lolling, listened and looked. He rushed at the bellwether, crowded his head to face up the draw, then nipped at his tail. The lead sheep let out a bleat and moved in the desired direction. He went because he was forced to. The flock followed as if an invisible force acted on each animal. The sheep crowded close together. Their rounded heads and rounded bodies gave the impression of some strange, knobbed creature undulating between banks of chaparral.

Milnor waited where he was, waiting for the shuffle of the flock and the clicks of hoofs on the stones to fade from hearing.

And when the sounds of the flock were faint, no other sound came to his ears. He stood upright on the saddle, balancing with the carbine, scanned the slope far and near and could detect no movement, no dust. He concluded the enemy was cutting in ahead of him, but, whether or not his maneuver of herding the flock to higher ground would thwart their design, he could not tell. He rode into the wash a little distance, then dismounted and led the mare.

The rains of other days had borne away much of the soil, leaving a residue of gravel and rocks. This made hard going for the sheep. The dogs wormed through the flock, going from front to rear. A few times they ran strays back to the flock. Twice, Milnor broke through the brush to extricate a sheep held in a trap of branches. The wash bent sharply to the right. The flock began to show. When Milnor made the turn so he could see ahead, he pulled in sharply.

A wall of rock blocked the way. About the center of it were the marks of a waterfall. Above and beyond the wall was the crest of the hills, and the pines there were plainly to be seen, distant, Milnor judged, about a quarter of a mile. He intended to go on foot to investigate a way around the wall.

A gun cracked and a bullet snapped so close to Milnor's cheek the concussion of it unbalanced him, and he half fell, half slipped from saddle to land a-sprawl upon hands and knees. A fusilade crashed from the wall. Milnor snatched the carbine and wriggled into the chaparral. The firing continued. He could see the powder smoke. The mare reared and fell sideways, killed by a shot through the head. Milnor spotted one of the enemy, thrust the carbine barrel through the thick foliage of his hiding place and squeezed the trigger.

The bullet sped true. The man who was behind a thin screen of brush, threw up his arms, staggered forward, tottered to the brink of the

wall and, after wavering there, plunged from the cliff. The crash of the body came plainly to Milnor, who scrambled away from the jetting smoke puff of the carbine. Bullets slashed the brush about him.

Sounded the boom of a heavy rifle and again. At first, Milnor did not get the significance of those reports. A six-gun fired three times, and Milnor glanced beyond the wall to the higher slope behind. He saw drifting powder smoke. There was confusion among the enemy. They yelled and made a rush to escape from between two fires. Milnor saw five men as they appeared in the open to rush down the slope at the north end of the wall. He got in a couple of snap shots, but without effect as far as he could tell. Milnor smiled. Help had come when he most needed it. Old Belle had taken his message to the home ranch and the Crowfoot Bench men had responded.

The sheep were bleating and rushing about. The dogs were barking. Milnor gave his attention to the flock, which was milling in the open space before the wall. There seemed to be no way out. The bare basin under the dry waterfall was a cul-de-sac. The narrow way in was blocked by the dead horse. Milnor knew he had to get the sheep out of this trap. He began to work around the huddled and frightened flock.

"Fred, oh, Fred!"

He jerked to attention, looked up. There in the center of the wall stood a boyish figure clad in overalls and jacket. Dark curls turned from under the sombrero and the sun gave the sheen from the cream neckerchief.

"April! Wha—where did you drop from? Where's the rest of our boys?"

"Oh, there aren't any more. I'm all that came, Fred."

Milnor grinned. "All right," he called. "You've got a job walkin' sheep." And added to himself, "If we can get 'em out of here."

CHAPTER VI.

SHEEP MUST GO ON.

APRIL was peering down from the wall. She pointed to the north end. "Right against the rock," she called, "is a narrow path. It's sort of lumpy."

"You better come off your perch," Milnor called back and went to investigate April's discovery.

Away from the shallow basin under the dry waterfall, there was a space at the cliff foot where no brush grew, for, through the years, fragments of rock had fallen from the cliff face, and among this heap of weathered pieces, no chaparral could grow. The heap sloped down from the cliff, but sheep could make it.

"Where are you, April?"

"Coming," she answered.

The dogs were holding the flock which had quieted, though still disturbed and bewildered.

Milnor called Remo and, when the dog came, pointed out the passage by the cliff.

"*Vaga; vaga*, Remo!"

He slipped to the rear of the flock and began to press the sheep. Remo barked. Fiel answered. Whether by accident or by reason, Remo did get what the man wanted and started in search of the bellwether. The tinkling bell indicated the whereabouts of the leader. Remo shouldered sheep aside until he found the leader and nosed him toward the wall.

"*Vaga; vaga!*" Milnor encouraged the dog and murmured to him-

self. "If I yell *vaga* much more, I'll be chasing myself over the hill."

April was breaking her way through the chaparral and Milnor went to help her. He took from her hands the heavy rifle with which she was burdened. They worked to the rear of the flock.

"How come," Milnor asked, "that you showed up alone? Did you get the note I tied to old Belle's saddle?"

"No note," April replied. "If I'd found a note, I would have taken it to my father. I thought the old horse got away, so"—she smiled—"I just came up to see if I could help."

"You saved my bacon," Milnor said. "And, April, don't try to pet the dogs or talk to them. I figure they're just machines. They would tear in pieces any man or animal that hurt the sheep."

April said she had no intention of harming the sheep and that she didn't like sheep.

The dogs were threading the flock into the narrow space at the foot of the wall. April said the land was fairly open up the slope.

"You see," said Milnor, moving up as the sheep advanced, "that note told my plan of taking sheep to the meadow to eat the larkspur, and some of Mundo's men must have accidentally found old Belle. I've been expecting Mundo because the herder in charge of this flock ran away." He told his adventures.

April was silent a while, then she said, "I didn't notice the larkspur at the big *cienaga*. It was dark, though."

"Where's your horse?" he asked quickly.

"Near your grub cache close to the mouth of the chute."

"Hobbled or tied?"

"Tied."

"Good. Then he can't browse on the larkspur. We may need a horse," he went on. "They killed mine. I'd better go take off the saddle."

He went on his unpleasant errand to return in a few minutes to find April watching the dogs thread the last of the flock into the narrow passage.

"Put the saddle as high as I could in the brush," he said. "Been thinking," he continued, "why Mundo's gang busted and ran without giving you a scrap."

"I fired the rifle, then I jumped away and fired my six-gun, then back to the rifle," she explained. "I wanted them to think I was a whole lot of men."

"It worked O. K.," Milnor commented. "You're a smart girl," he praised and took a deep breath. "We'll have to be plenty smart from now on." He hefted the rifle and smiled ruefully at the weight. "I figure they'll cut ahead and lay for us and the sheep before we get to the meadow. They'll stampede the sheep, kill us, too." He looked at April. "A gunshot away, you look like a man," he said, eying her overalls and jacket. He kept his gaze upon his birthday present. "You see the larkspur guards the trail better'n fifty men could. When our herd reaches the feed, no power on earth can keep 'em from feeding, larkspur and all."

"All right, Fred, we fight."

"No argument on that out of me," Milnor said, and grinned.

They followed the last of the flock and came out to fairly open country where the dogs were holding the sheep. Milnor shouted and pointed with the rifle and the drive was on again.

MILNOR trudged on. With advance he saw, if he had gone on a few hundred feet, he would have come to where the chaparral was scant and he could have avoided the hard way up the wash. But then, he figured, the wall had saved his life and the sheep.

He halted and called April to him.

"You see," he began, "they're going to jump us so I aim to go and beat 'em to it. We've got to get the sheep to the meadow."

April looked up the slope to the pines, her look traveled along the crest of the hills and she nodded.

"You go on, Fred," she agreed, "I can walk the sheep." She turned her face away so as to hide the tremble of her lips.

But not soon enough to escape Milnor's attention. He knew she was game. Also, he knew they could not go on passively and wait for an attack.

"I don't like to leave you," he said, "but there's nothing else to be done. They won't figure we'll try a crack at 'em. If anything happens, you fire your six-gun three times."

April nodded. "I'll do that," she said. "And, Fred, you'd better take the carbine. It's lighter."

"I like this cannon," Milnor claimed. "It will shoot a mile."

He didn't want to burden her with the heavy rifle. The reason Croft had not taken the weapon on the drive was on account of its weight.

The flock continued to flow up the slope through the open spaces amid the brush. The sheep continually dropped their heads to pluck at the scant, dry herbage. They were hungry, they were accustomed to browse as they walked, but Milnor kept urging the dogs to crowd them on. He got April to give the words of direction so the dogs became used to her voice. What they required, it seemed, was intelligent human guidance.

The flock reached the crest and there, under the pines, Milnor allowed them a breathing spell. He looked at the sun, in the direction of the meadow, and calculated they would reach their destination near noon. Time did not count, the purpose was the all-important thing.

Milnor said to April: "There isn't feed to amount to anything under and near the pines. The pine needles and shade of the trees smother the grass. Haze the sheep along. I'll be back as soon's I can."

"Good luck, Fred."

"So long, April."

Milnor adjusted his gun belt and started away on a trot with the rifle at the trail. The pine needles cushioned his footfalls. The top of the ridge was gently rounded. The view ahead was obscured by the pines, large and small and clumps of chaparral. At this height grew the manzanita with its dull-red trunks and branches. As Milnor progressed, the chaparral on the down slope became hardier and denser, making it difficult for men on horses to come up from below.

The heavy rifle dragged upon Milnor, and he stopped to rest a moment. He could not keep up the pace he had set and he had covered no more than a quarter of a mile. The pines murmured soothingly, but the sound could not allay the feeling Milnor had that danger lurked in any of many directions. The morning sun was comfortably warm, the air clear on the heights, and the whole face of nature was so peaceful and serene. Strife and greed had no place in such a spot.

A slight movement down the slope caught Milnor's eye. A bevy of quail came out of a thicket, their

plumed heads bobbing as they came to the open. He kept motionless. One quail flew to the top of a bush from which vantage he could keep watch for the bevy. He looked all about and made a quiet, chuckling sound. The bevy began to feed. Their legs twinkled as they scratched furiously, sending the dry, fallen leaves of the chaparral in showers behind them. They grumbled softly as they pecked at bugs and seeds and shouldered one another aside. Milnor moved slightly. The sentinel gave three quick notes of warning and crouched on his perch. The bevy became motionless, waiting for instructions from their guard. Milnor remained still and confidence came to the guard. He gave a call of all's well and the quail began to scratch with increased enthusiasm.

Milnor smiled. He had to go on. Three shots, quick though evenly spaced, sounded from the direction Milnor had come. He jerked up the rifle and started on a run back toward the flock. The quail disappeared in the twinkling of an eye. Milnor ran with the rifle held in both hands before him. He did not feel its weight, he did not see the pines rush behind him, he did not hear the trumpet call of the quail assembling the bevy, he did not smell the aroma sun steeped from the land. All he was aware of was that April was in trouble.

He realized he could not keep on at this same wild speed. He slowed a little and began to breathe more deeply. He tried to conjecture what had happened. No more shots had come. He raced on, dodging among the pines, looking out for fallen branches that might trap his feet. Then rounding a clump of manzanita, he came in sight of the flock. He stopped, dropped to the ground, extended the rifle.

The flock had halted, bewildered. A man was attempting to turn back the sheep by waving his arms and shouting. The dogs were barking. Milnor could not see them. East of the flock on the down-slope side, another man had hold of April, held her close, but the cream-colored neckerchief was plain.

MILNOR judged the distance and raised the rear sight of the rifle. He wriggled into position to fire. The man trying to herd the sheep changed position so he was partially screened by an intervening bush. The other man was too close to April to risk a shot. Milnor considered. He knew he was unseen. If he attempted a rush, the guns of both men would pour lead at him. Firing in the vicinity of the flock might stampede it. Milnor had to rescue April and he must preserve the flock.

The sheep were bleating. Some of them escaped from the flock to be driven back by the dogs. The would-be herder was shouting and waving his hat. Maybe he did intend to stampede the sheep. Milnor decided he would take a shot at him. He began to wriggle over the ground in order to get a clear aim. Sheep were loose at the fringe of the flock.

April began to struggle with her captor. He clutched her by the jacket and her arms flailed at his head. She broke loose, tripped and fell and was caught again. Her captor stood between April and Milnor. The dogs had ceased to bark. Silently, they drove the sheep back to the flock. Faintly came the rapid tinkling of the bellwether's bell.

With sudden resolve, Milnor aimed the cocked rifle in the direction of the would-be sheep-herder, but not at him. He sighted carefully. The heavy rifle was as solid

as a rock. Milnor applied pressure to the trigger. The gun roared and jetted forth a volume of powder smoke. Milnor dropped the gun and sprang to his feet. With six-gun drawn, he raced toward the flock.

What he figured might happen had actually happened. He had fired at a sheep and the animal was bleating in pain. The dogs, true to their trust and instinct, attacked the man who, they thought, had hurt the sheep. There was a tangled mass of dogs and man rolling upon the ground. April was clinging tight to her captor, keeping him from drawing a weapon. He broke free from the girl as Milnor neared, broke and ran, to disappear down the slope. Milnor couldn't understand that. He made for the fight between man and dogs. As he came near, he saw he was too late. Snarling, the dogs drew away from their victim. Milnor shuddered.

"*Vaga; vaga!*" he ordered the dogs, putting all the firmness he could into his voice.

Remo and Fiel obeyed reluctantly.

April was running to Milnor.

"Stay there," he told her, glancing at the dogs. "I'll come."

She stood still. In her hand, she had a gun belt with the holster empty.

At his questioning look, she explained, "While I was hanging onto him, I managed to unbuckle the belt, but the gun flopped out."

"Where did he go?"

"Downhill," April said, and pointed.

Milnor ran a few steps, regarded the heavy brush and returned.

He said, "The sheep must——"

"Listen."

From down the slope came a crackling of brush louder than a man could have made.

"He's riding away," April said.

They listened for a few moments, but heard no more.

April asked: "What were you going to say about the sheep, Fred?"

"The sheep must go on, was what I started to say."

"Yes," she agreed.

After a short search, they found the gun that belonged in the holster April had captured. Her own gun was found, too. Milnor buckled on the extra belt and gun.

Milnor called to the dogs and quietly set about getting the flock in order to walk on. He looked for the sheep he had wounded, but could not locate it. The flock shied away from the dead man. April glanced at the body, paled and gasped.

"Oh!" she uttered.

"Those dogs jump for the throat," Milnor said. "It's a horrible way to die, but quick. All the dogs know is to herd and protect the sheep."

No more was said on that subject and there was nothing which could be done then about the body.

"How did they catch you, April?"

"I was just walking behind the sheep," she said, "thinking how quiet and peaceful everything was when a man jumped out of the chaparral and grabbed. We wrestled. I got my gun out, but my arms were held. All I could do was to fire the three signal shots into the ground, then the other man came up. By that time, the sheep had gone on a ways."

"Did they talk?"

"Not much. They decided to drive the sheep back, and, I'm sure, that had not been planned."

"Have you ever seen either of them before?"

"Yes. The one that got away was the man with the snakeskin hatband."

"He'll pop up again," Milnor prophesied.

He went ahead of the flock to regain the rifle, which he did, then waited at one side for the sheep to come up. The animals were hungry, walked with heads outstretched, sniffing for something to eat. What little forage there was, the leading ranks of the flock nipped. This attempt to forage slowed the flock. Milnor joined April. They walked in silence for a space.

"Fred, are you going ahead to the meadow."

He nodded. He had been thinking of that, what he should do, and the idea persisted that it would be an advantage if he could jump the sheepmen before they jumped him. He didn't know their number. Two of them had been accounted for, but Mundo, including his hired guards, could certainly muster a dozen or more fighting men.

"We ought to be there in an hour," April said.

Milnor glanced up at the sun.

"Just about," he agreed.

The flock now was straggling along, the animals bleating and restlessly swinging from side to side. The dogs, one on either flank of the flock, their tongues lolling, tails drooping, kept apace with the sheep.

The bellwether swung to the left to avoid a thicket of chaparral. His bell tinkled. He came to the top of the thicket. He snorted. He plunged away. The bell jangled.

"Look out, Fred!"

CHAPTER VII.

THE BATTLE FOR THE FLOCK.

APRIL dashed toward Milnor. Hoofs pounded, yells resounded as riders burst from the concealment of the chaparral to rush upon the sheep. Milnor dropped the rifle. His six-gun flashed from leather. He fired once and again. A panic-stricken sheep rushed against him. He recovered and, grasping April's hand, started for the chaparral. He crashed into the brush, his hat was jerked off, limbs plucked at his legs, but he forced his way on. At length, panting and spent, they kneeled in a little pocket. April still clung to the carbine.

"You—you all right?" Milnor gasped out.

April nodded.

The dogs were barking, the sheep bleating, the men yelling and firing. A few bullets came searching into the chaparral.

"They stampeded the sheep," April said.

Milnor did not answer. His thoughts were black. All that he had accomplished undone. Here was defeat, final and complete. Judging by the sounds, some of the enemy stood by watching the chaparral, while others continued the rout of the flock. The barking of the dogs became fainter.

"Cheer up, Fred, they haven't got us licked yet." April's face was woebegone, though she did her best to smile cheerfully.

"We won't sit and take it, that's a cinch," Milnor answered.

As he reloaded the chambers of the gun he had fired, he thought. In the confusion he had been unable to count the enemy and he didn't give a hoot how many there were.

"I'm going out," he said abruptly. "You stay in the brush, April."

She agreed at once, agreed too easily, but that escaped Milnor.

Then she said: "If we were on the other side of the ridge, I could go for help to our men."

"You can't get over the ridge," he said. "The ground is too open."

Milnor unbuckled one of the two gun belts he wore and thrust the second gun into the bosom of his shirt. He looked about.

"I'm going that way," he said, pointing up the slope. "They won't figure I'll come out of the same hole I went into." He paused and added: "I'm entitled to be right once." He was thinking of how Mundo and his men had surprised them by attacking this side of the meadow. "So long, April."

She made a quick movement and her hands rested upon his shoulders. She drew his face closer and kissed him full on the lips. She thrust herself back and her face was flaming.

"Gee whiskers!" Milnor uttered and blinked rapidly. "Gosh!"

"Oh, Fred!"

"That's all right, April, I like it. But——" He began to scramble away.

"You be careful, Fred." There was a break in her voice.

Milnor had to go slowly so as not to jar and shake the branches of the brush. He had to wriggle along like a snake, but progress was made by inches. He approached the bush line. He could see through the screen of branches the brown weed stubble on the open and, beyond the stubble the rugged trunks of the pines. None of the enemy was visible nor was there any sound at all except the distant barking of the sheep dogs. The dogs would be with the sheep. The barking came from the west, over the ridge.

And what would he, Milnor, do if he were in Mundo's place? Well, Milnor decided, he would keep the sheep from reaching the meadow. He would hold the flock; he would hunt out and destroy the herders who were walking the sheep, in this case, April and he. And what, Milnor asked himself, could he do about it? He would have to do plenty.

A slight scratching behind Milnor caught his attention. He glanced over a shoulder and saw April. She wriggled to his side.

"I can't sit in the brush like a hen," she protested in a whisper. "I have to do something."

Milnor sympathized with her, but he was puzzled what to do with her.

"April, you'll have to be careful." Then he suppressed a snicker. "That sounded so dog-gone silly."

"It is silly," April declared.

"Lie low!"

Walking on tiptoe, six-gun in hand, a man who acted like an amateur rabbit hunter appeared, scouting the brush line for game. His head was thrust forward, and he peered under his sombrero brim. One boot after the other was reached cautiously forward as if the owner were walking on eggs. He was the thin man known as Slim.

Because he could see plainly, Milnor thought he could be as easily seen. His gun was ready. He could feel April tremble. Step by step, the enemy advanced. A branch obstructed Milnor's view. He moved a little to one side and a dry limb under him snapped with a sharp crackle. The sound seemed to fill all the world.

April gasped.

The enemy halted, one foot raised, and scanned the brush. His eyes were narrow. Milnor could see he held his breath. The man moved his head and his gun swung to come nearer and nearer to the point at the pair. Milnor's thumb was on the hammer of his six-gun. When the man put his foot down, he intended to fire.

RIDING hard, two horsemen swept into view. One swerved his horse to avoid a low pine limb. Each man held his gun in hand. The tails of the horses streamed. The brims of the riders' sombreros were flattened against the crowns.

Slim stamped his poised foot to earth, looked, and up jerked his gun. Milnor fired. The bullet struck a heavy limb and went whining off into space.

"They're our men!" April shouted and sprang to her feet.

Slim's gun jumped twice.

One of the Crowfoot Bench men toppled backward from saddle, his body twisting as he fell.

A branch caught Milnor's vest and kept him momentarily from aiming. He took a snap shot at Slim, who ran to the west. The second Crowfoot Bench man swung his horse around. He fired toward the north.

"Chuck; Chuck Owen!" Milnor yelled, crashing through to the brush line.

Guns were popping on three sides of Owen. He saw Milnor, wheeled his horse and came tumbling out of saddle as the horse came down. Owen scrambled clear of the kicking horse. Crouching, he ran to his friends. His eyes widened at sight of April.

"Come on," Milnor yelled, and started toward the body of the Crowfoot Bench man. "Who is he?" And by the posture of the fallen man, Milnor knew he should have asked: "Who was he?"

"Bill Reed."

Two of the enemy were visible; jetting smoke puffs from the chaparral showed where two more were hidden. As they ran, Milnor and Owen fired. April swung up the carbine, fired as she ran. They came to Reed's body. One quick glimpse was enough for Milnor. There was a bullet hole in the center of the dead man's forehead.

"Come on!" Milnor yelled.

He stooped and gathered up the gun that had fallen from Reed's lifeless hand, thrust his empty weapon in his shirt bosom and opened fire with the new gun. The three went on at a run and fairly threw themselves into the chaparral. The brush was thick. With difficulty, they worked into it. They separated, each from the other a little way. They rested, breathing heavily, and listened. Milnor gave a belt and gun to Owen.

No sound broke the silence. There was not enough breeze to move the stiff foliage of the chaparral. A shadow slipped over them and Milnor glanced up to see a buzzard high in air, gliding on in motionless flight. The thought came to him that likely a feast would be spread for many buzzards. He began to assemble the flashes of the land he had seen while running into one picture. They were on the western side of the ridge, the same side down which the flock had been driven. He had glimpsed the way they had gone, a place where the brush was scant, a sort of aisle between the dense growths on either side. He wondered where the sheep were. Like an echo to his thought sounded the bark of a sheep dog and by the sound, judged the flock was within a quarter of a mile of where they lay.

He looked at his companions and each of them looked inquiringly back. Their looks asked: "What now?"

"Which way did Bill's horse run?"

"That way," April answered, pointing to the south.

"No chance of him headin' back and showin' our men there's trouble," Owen said.

"Guess that's right," Milnor agreed. He wriggled a little closer to Owen.

"How's the drive coming, Chuck?"

"Mighty slow. Never see such a' ornery herd to handle in my life."

"When will the cows reach the meadow? That is, if they're not hindered?"

"To-morrow mornin', I'd guess," Owen answered. "That is, late in the mornin'." He plucked a twig and stuck it in the corner of his mouth. "The old man"—he glanced at April and began anew—"Hi Croft sent me and Bill to see what had become of you. We got to the meadow, heard shots and came on here hell bent fer election." He nodded at Milnor.

Milnor nodded back and asked, "Did you see the larkspur in the meadow?"

"It's lousy with it. Every Crowfoot Bench cow what chewed that weed would bust out pronto for the happy huntin' ground." Owen's face was solemn. "Say, Fred, whatcha goin' to do about them larkspur?"

"Sheep," Milnor replied.

"Aw—uh—sheep!" Owen took the twig from his mouth and looked at the chewed end. "Seems I did hear something 'bout sheep. Sure, sheep chaw larkspur and like it. It's your turn to palaver, Fred."

"He caught a flock of sheep," April put in eagerly. "I helped him. We got this far and were jumped."

"That's it," Milnor said. "Listen, you fellers. There's too much quiet around here. Those buzzards are up to something. Say, Chuck, is April's horse still tied up at the meadow?"

"Yes. I watered him and tied him in a new place to eat."

"What do you want a horse for?" April wanted to know.

"I don't." Milnor avoided April's look.

HE wanted her to ride that horse to the Crowfoot Bench men, but he wasn't yet going to tell her so. The chance might not come to send her for help. He had in mind a scheme, the dangers of which he would share with no one. It was time to go. They had rested.

"April, crawl that way"—he pointed—"and see what you can spot. Keep in the heavy brush and don't jiggle it. And keep back from the open."

She nodded and set off without questioning.

"Listen, Chuck, you take April and set out, make a wide swing. The idea is, you shoo the sheep in the direction of the meadow if you get a chance. You may have to shoot the dogs, but don't do it unless they try to jump you. I like those dogs. If you get in a jam, fire your gun three times and I'll come if I can. The main idea is to start April for help."

"Yes, and what are you agoin' to do, Fred?"

"I'm starting out to make sheepmen dog-gone hard to find in this country."

Owen pursed his lips in a soundless whistle.

"Say, you ain't ambitious, are you?"

"Glory to Betsy an' seven hands round," exclaimed Milnor. "Want me to sit on my pants?"

"No, I don't, I wanta play, too."

"Somebody's got to look after April."

"Oh, all right," Owen agreed. He threw the chewed twig away and

looked sideways at Milnor. "I'll do what I can."

"Don't get funny," Milnor warned.

"What's funny?"

April had come back. She looked at both men. Sunlight filtered through the foliage of the chaparral, giving a greenish cast to the faces of the three.

"Nothing's funny, April." Milnor decided now was as good a time as any to get away. "You stick with Chuck, April," he said, and started off wriggling through the brush as rapidly and as quietly as he could.

At his start, he heard April begin to protest, then Chuck cut in, whispering tensely and rapidly. When he had progressed a short way, he looked back to see that April and Chuck had commenced to move in a direction opposite to his. He had lost his hat. He tucked in his shirt, adjusted his gun belt and buttoned his vest tight. He thought of Bill Reed and made sure the holstered gun and the one in his shirt bosom were loaded to capacity, then he started out on a hunt for trouble.

He worked through the brush until he came to the place where the sheep had been driven. Here for a space the chaparral grew sparsely. Milnor noted the wisps of fleece held by twigs and the ends of branches. He drew his guns and, holding one in each hand, started to carry the war to the enemy. Crouching, moving quietly, he glided to the first clump, looked and listened, then went on.

Somewhere to his left was the flock; concealed in the dense chaparral ahead were the enemy, waiting to locate him. The land on that side of the crest was cut up with many washes and small, rounded ridges, for the most part covered with brush, but with many bare spots and clear aisles. He worked through the chaparral to the brush line near the crest of the hill.

He peered cautiously forth. There lay Chuck's horse and, a little to the north of it, Bill Reed's body sprawled grotesquely. Milnor looked at the dead man, gripped the butts of his guns hard, and, crouching, began a stealthy walk along the brush line. He did not care if he met Mundo and his whole gang.

Milnor swung around an outjutting bush to come face to face with an enemy. The man's long face became longer with surprise, his jaw dropping as his eyes widened. Milnor lunged and struck with his right six-gun. The weapon struck the man full upon the jaw, knocking him flat. Milnor pounced upon the unconscious form. His first act was to retrieve the sombrero and clap it on his head. The hat did not fit well. His captive wore a calfskin vest with the hair out. Milnor took this off and slipped it on. He took off the man's boots, then, for lack of anything better, began with his knife to cut the prisoner's pants legs into strips from hem to belt. He bound the ankles together, began to tie the wrists.

The man came to, groaned and tried to move.

"If you know what's healthy for you, keep your trap shut," Milnor warned him.

The prisoner mumbled a reply.

Milnor knotted the first strip.

"Uh—not so tight, feller. You'll cut off my circulation."

"I aim to do just that," Milnor stated, "and the circulation of the rest of your litter of skunks. How many men has Mundo around here?" He jammed the muzzle of his six-gun against his prisoner's ribs.

"Uh—sev—you go to hell!"

The gun jabbed.

"That's better. Where are they?"

"Uh—around here—three of 'em are north of us. D-d-don't you punch me ag'in."

"Where are the other three?"

"Dunno—ouch! With the sheep."

Milnor thought a few moments. What the prisoner said had the ring of truth.

"If you was a cowpoke," he commented. "You wouldn't tell nothing. Turn over."

AGAINST his prisoner's protests, he gagged him and left him, carrying his boots. Milnor went on a hunt for more trouble. When he had gone a short distance, he hid the boots he was carrying. Hat pulled down, he walked erect, confident the enemy, if any were about, would hail him because of the calfskin vest he wore. He held a gun in each hand. One he had taken from his shirt bosom.

"Hey, Brunt!"

The voice issued from the chaparral behind Milnor and with such sharpness and suddenness as to startle him. Brunt, evidently, was the owner of the calfskin vest. He jerked around and the ill-fitting hat twisted from his head. A man, head and shoulders showing above the brush, yelled, up snapped his gun.

Milnor let go with both guns, firing three shots from each, jumped aside from the powder smoke. Too, powder smoke was drifting thinly above the brush. The man who had yelled and fired was no longer visible. Milnor advanced cautiously, all intent. From a distance, came the sharp crack of a gun followed by the bark of a dog. Milnor listened, his gaze on the place where the enemy had appeared. A slight noise, indistinct and vague, came to Milnor. He leaned forward, trying at one and the same time to know the significance of the near sound and the distant gunshot.

Boots pounded. Milnor whirled, jumped back, guns ready, then, as an enemy appeared around a point of brush, a crushing weight landed upon his head and shoulders. Milnor staggered forward and stumbled to his knees. The man who had jumped him from behind was pitched forward to the ground. The other man, carried onward by the momentum of his run tripped over his companions and landed upon Milnor. Immediately, there was a wild tangle of kicking legs and flailing arms.

Milnor had lost one gun. With his free hand, he punched as he kicked. His gun hand was clamped immovable to the weapon. There was continual movement before his eyes. The tangle rolled in the brush which cracked and snapped. The sharp end of a broken limb jabbed Milnor in the back. The sharp pain made him twist with all his strength. He wrenched the gun free from the vise that held it. Something struck him between the eyes and a thousand stars danced. He felt as if he were in a rolling barrel in the company of a couple of wild cats.

The struggle slackened. The three combatants panted and gasped. The two began to get together in team work. A gun butt whizzed past Milnor's head. One of the enemy got hold of the wrist of his gun hand. His breath began to hiss between set jaws. A hand sought his throat. He fought it off. He tried to free his gun hand. They fought slowly while breath escaped in puffs. They writhed together in silence. Then three gunshots, close together, sounded faintly in the distance.

The signal of his friends acted like a charm on Milnor. New strength came to him. He twisted his body, shoved with his hands, pried himself loose from the man who held him clasped. He jabbed with the gun and pulled the trigger. The smoke and gases of the explosion were like a blast of red-hot air in his face. The roar of the explosion was muffled and the power of it seemed to blow Milnor free. He swung over, firing as he rolled. He aimed by instinct, fired twice, got shakily to his feet. His sight was blurred by powder smoke and perspiration. He rubbed a forearm across his eyes and felt, rather than saw, that the sleeve had been torn off.

His first clear impression was that he was alone in the midst of a great silence; the second, that he was entirely alone. Without glancing at the bodies of the men with whom he had fought, he started on a stumbling run. He had one gun and did not think to gather another. He blinked his eyes. All he heard was the sound of his own footfalls.

He eased his pace a little and gradually his sight cleared. He felt aches and pains all over his body. One ear burned and, when he felt of it, his hand came away covered with blood. His clothes were torn. Perspiration oozed from every pore of his body. He took off the calfskin vest and tossed it aside and immediately felt cooler. He remembered to load his gun and fingered shells from his belt to load the empty chambers. The gun held six shots.

He saw a tag of wool hanging to a bush, then another, and knew he had come to the way the sheep had gone. He trotted on, dodging this way and that among the clumps of brush. He was traveling downhill. The way became steeper and freer of brush and now the broken nature of the country began to reveal itself, Milnor became aware of a sound which for some time had been registered upon his eardrums, the bleating of sheep.

CHAPTER VIII.

JUDGMENT OF THE FLOCK.

MILNOR halted, squatted behind a screen of chaparral, and took in the situation. The hillside sloped down to rise again and the space between rises was not wide and it was not a clean sweep, for on the left obtruded a mound which hid the space between itself and the rise while on the near side of it was another tiny valley which led where Milnor could not see. To the right was much more irregular ground, there being many humps and mounds. There was no brush at all, just a dried, short stubble of grass and weeds, so it was impossible to tell in which direction the sheep had gone; nor did their bleating tell where they were held. The whole layout reminded Milnor of the troubled land over which the Crowfoot Bench herd must be driven, or was being driven.

If three of Mundo's men were with the flock, as the prisoner had revealed, why hadn't they gone to see what the firing was about? Perhaps they had, Milnor reasoned, or they could have gone by another way. He recalled the three signal shots, but no more firing had come from this direction. He got to his feet, decided to explore the southern part of the country which lay to his left and stepped from his shelter. With his first step in the clear, a bullet struck the earth directly before him, sending a jetting shower of dirt about his legs.

Milnor leaped behind his brush

screen, peering about to locate the telltale powder smoke. He couldn't locate it. A bullet cut through the brush several feet from where he stood. The report followed after an interval of a second or two. The smoke was not visible. Milnor dropped to his knees. The enemy were probing his shelter either trying to smoke him out or hoping to get him by chance. Another bullet slashed through the chaparral, scattering leaves. The sharpshooter was some distance away, and well concealed.

Milnor decided there was no profit to be gained by hopping around in the brush like a rabbit. He crept to an end of his screen and carefully studied the ground below, then gave a grunt of satisfaction, got to his feet and began to race down the slope. He ran to the right, headed for the humps and mounds. Now that he was in the clear, the concealed sharpshooter came to view from the thick chaparral on the hillside. Milnor ran a zigzag course, making no attempt to return the fire. He came to a jumble of rocks which formed an island in the hollow between two low elevations. He gained the rocks. Here he was protected from the sharpshooter upon the slope.

He rested a moment, then raised his head. A bullet struck the rock close to his head and peppered his face with rock fragments. Milnor ducked, realizing he had entered a trap. He knew the only way to escape a trap was to fight back hard and quick before the machinery of the scheme could finish him. Gathering himself together, he suddenly sprang upright. Not ten feet away, the man with the rattlesnake hatband was advancing on a run. They fired in the same instant. Milnor fired a second time through the powder smoke, scrambled from amid the rocks, and saw Quinn lying on the ground. He was slowly turning over on his back. One hand was pressed against his bosom and the other still held the smoking six-gun. Quinn lay gasping his life out.

Milnor ran for the shelter of the rock, stooped and rested his left hand upon an upright slab and waited for the enemy to make the next move. There were two more of them and, most likely, the two were Mundo and his other lieutenant, Slim. Milnor's nerves began to jump, he fidgeted, he began to hear all sorts of sounds above the bleating of the sheep which, judging by the strength of their baa-ing, could not be far away.

He could not stand the waiting any longer. So he started for a mound, the shoulder of which hid a portion of the slope where had been the sharpshooter. Cautiously, he rounded the shoulder and there was Slim, working around the shoulder from his side.

Both men saw the other in the same flash; both men fired. Milnor's right leg was swept from under him. He fired again, and jerked his leg in place. He knew he was hit. The powder smoke lifted. Slim was not in sight. He had disappeared as if the earth had opened and swallowed him. Then Milnor noticed the hat and, just beyond it, a depression in the ground. He began to circle warily, the wounded leg obeying his will sluggishly. He watched the ground by the hat.

A movement to a side of it caught his eye. Slim's gun snapped up; then the top of his head. Both men fired, Milnor's shot first by a split second. Dirt and dust spurted where Slim had popped up. Cautious step by cautious step, Milnor circled. With a twist and jerk,

Slim's body heaved to view and Milnor fired before he realized the man was in his death's agony. He couldn't stop the shot. Slim pitched face down over his hat and lay still, the fingers of both hands twitching. His gun was nowhere to be seen.

Milnor had won the second cast with death. He began to walk slowly toward the sheltering rocks, wondering how long he would be able to use his leg. He felt the blood trickle down his calf. He sat down, gun beside him, and rolled up his pants leg. He cut away his drawers with his pocketknife. The bullet had taken a nick out of the flesh on the inside of his leg about ten inches above the knee. With his bandanna, he bound the wound tight. The bleeding stopped, but he knew the constricting handkerchief would hamper movement of the leg. He picked up his gun, got to his feet and tried a few steps, his look on his leg. He thought the leg was beginning to stiffen.

He remembered his gun was empty, opened the side gate and began to poke out the fired shells with the ejector rod.

"Just don't bother, cowboy. You won't need that gun no more."

AS Milnor raised his head to look, a chill as of death flowed up his spine. He stood rigid. A hundred feet away, Mundo stood with a double-barreled shotgun poised in his hands. Both hammers were cocked. Under his sombrero brim, the hair was plastered to his forehead. He was grimy and dusty, tired lines lay upon his face, but his eyes were bright and he stood at perfect ease. There was a grimace of hate on his broad face.

Thoughts flashed quicker than the darting lightning in Milnor's mind. Where Mundo had come from, he didn't know. He stood in that hollow between high banks, not far behind him was another bank, for the hollow twisted away from sight to the left.

"Better pull your lower jaw up, cowboy." Mundo chuckled. "Got you dead to rights."

"Yep, there's no argument," Milnor replied. "Strikes me, though, you could fight with a man's gun."

"This scattergun is right good for skunk-killin', cowboy."

Milnor said nothing. The fingers of his left hand touched his gun belt. If he could keep Mundo talking, he might pull a shell from a loop. And if—there were a lot of "ifs" in the way. Mundo with a twist of his wrists could bring the shotgun to bear. He could level and fire before Milnor could get set to throw his useless six-gun. And who could not dodge a missile at a hundred feet?

"Sure, looks like you got the bulge, Mundo."

Mundo nodded. He was enjoying himself.

"What happened to your right leg? I see blood on your pants."

"Why, I don't rightly know." Two of Milnor's fingers rested upon the base of a shell in his belt. "Cut myself while shaving, I guess."

"Humorous as hell, ain't you?" Mundo growled. "You won't be so damn humorous with eighteen buckshot in your carcass."

"I reckon. I hear your sheep blattin'. Maybe they're hungry."

"Mebbe so," agreed Mundo. "They're hungry enough to eat larkspur, only they won't git no chance. Them sheep are in a little box canyon yonder and there they stay until my herders come up."

"We all make a bum draw now and then," Milnor observed. He got a finger nail under the rim of the shell and drew it upward a trifle.

Mundo's eyes were half veiled by the lids. He shifted the gun, pointing it a little more directly at Milnor.

The bell of the lead sheep tinkled clamorously. The animals began a loud bleating. A murmur of their movements came now.

Mundo listened, though his look never left Milnor, and he seemed to study him.

Milnor figured he was getting ready to shoot and all he, Milnor, could do would be to try to duck and dodge and that hindered with a game leg. He drew the shell from its loop and held it concealed in his fingers. The side gate to the cylinder was open. Boldly, he clasped his right wrist with his left hand. By this act the shell held between thumb and forefinger of his left hand was very near the side gate. A little luck and he might make it.

The bleating of the sheep became louder. Milnor wondered why he did not hear the barking of the dogs. The sheep bell was ringing wildly.

Mundo put the gun butt to his shoulder. Milnor tensed, shoved the shell at the side gate and missed. The shell struck his boot toe. He knew Mundo would shoot him, then go see what was the matter with the sheep. Mundo brought the gun to his shoulder.

At the bend of the hollow, not thirty feet from Mundo, appeared a rolling, lunging mass of sheep. They were bleating and bawling. Gunshots echoed hollowly.

"Look out!" Milnor yelled and hurled his gun.

The gun went high over the sheepman's head.

Instinctively, Mundo turned.

Milnor dropped and began a flight toward the rocky shelter, expecting at any moment to be crushed by the double discharge of the gun. He glanced over a shoulder. Mundo stood undecided a moment, fired both barrels at the avalanche of sheep. Milnor gained the rocks and clawed upward. He looked back. Mundo had started to run. The maddened flock overtook him. The man held his own for a short way and then, either because he stumbled or some sheep rammed his legs, down he went to disappear under the rolling, humping backs of the sheep. The flock swept on. The hammer of their hoofs made a thunder, and dust banners twisted and streamed behind them.

Milnor clung to his perch and watched the river of sheep flood past. They were gone and the dust of their going clouded the air. Painfully, he got down from the rocks, stood a moment. Two men were approaching through the thinning dust cloud. His first thought was of flight. He looked at them. The smaller one wore a cream-colored neckerchief.

"April!" Milnor yelled. "Chuck!"

He started to run to them, forgetful of his leg, but he hobbled on. They ran to him, shouting their gladness. When they met, they clasped hands.

"Why, Fred, you're—you're all chewed and scratched!" April cried.

"And your clothes are all torn!" Owen added. "Looks like you been scrappin' with a couple of buzz saws."

"I did do quite a lot of buzzin'," Milnor admitted, then said: "I heard your three signal shots and I came as soon as I could."

"Signal shots?" repeated Owen, glancing at April. "We didn't give any signal. We heard three shots down this way after the firing higher up." He frowned. "And I'm tellin' you, Fred, the only reason I left you was to try to get April on her way to the herd."

April made a face. "You bet I wouldn't leave," she said.

"It came out all right," Milnor replied. "And another thing, what's become of the sheep dogs?"

"After those three shots, we didn't hear them bark any more," April observed.

"That's right," Owen confirmed. "While we were workin' toward the flock, we worried about the dogs."

Milnor nodded. No doubt, the dogs, made frantic by the rough treatment of the flock, had turned on the herders.

"Anyhow, you stampeded the sheep," Milnor said.

"You told us to," Owen replied.

"Uh—that's right, but I sort of figured you'd send April to the herd," Milnor smiled.

"She wouldn't go," Owen said.

"Then let us go," Milnor said, and took a step.

HE took another and stopped. The cords and the muscles of his leg were sore and stiff. Every nerve in the hurt leg protested. He winced.

April cried out, "There's blood on your leg! You're hurt!"

"We got to go on," Milnor said.

"There's horses back here," Owen put in. "To one side of that box canyon where the sheep were held. I'll go get 'em." He started away on a run.

April was all solicitude. She insisted that Milnor sit down and let her examine his wound. She paled when she saw it, helplessly fluttered her hands, then snatched the silk neckerchief from around her throat. She considered it a moment, tears came to her eyes, then she bravely tugged the silk in two pieces. With one she made a pad for the wound; with the other half, she bandaged the pad in place.

"That's better, isn't it?"

"Much better."

She looked away and her glance fell upon the dusty, flattened heap upon the ground. Much of the dust and grime was stained a dull red.

"That was Mundo," Milnor said in explanation. "His sheep got him."

That was all that was said about it.

Owen appeared, riding a horse and leading two by the reins. He drew away as far as possible from Mundo's battered corpse. He pulled up.

"Ready?"

"All set," Milnor replied. "April, you'd better ride that gray."

"Fred, can you get in saddle?"

Milnor tried to stand on his right leg which wabbled, but held him. Placing his left foot in the stirrup, he mounted slowly and took the reins.

"There are four more horses back there," Owen said.

Milnor counted in his mind. Mundo and four of his men were dead, one was a prisoner. There was an extra horse.

"Saw a guitar leaning against a bush," Owen said.

The extra horse was explained. The little Mexican with the sad face had accompanied Mundo and had hidden out.

"Let's go," said Milnor and set spurs.

It was easy to follow the flock. They had gone the way they had come. Up toward the ridge, dust still hung in the air. Milnor led his companions. They came to the crest of the hill. Milnor pulled up and motioned to his friends to halt.

He pointed to the north, in the direction of the meadow. Partly hidden by chaparral, the drag of the straggling flock was visible.

"They went the right way," Owen said.

Milnor pointed to Owen's dead horse and to the body of Bill Reed.

"They shied away from there," Milnor said. "We'll come back for Bill. Our job ain't done until the sheep eat that dog-gone larkspur. Come on."

They rode among the pines at a good clip until they neared the flock. The sheep by their actions and appearance showed how weary they were. The three followed at a distance until the meadow was in sight.

"Will they drink first or eat?" Owen asked.

"They'll eat," Milnor answered. "We'll have to crowd 'em to the larkspur. Wish we had the dogs."

They had to harry the sheep, force them up the meadow, for the animals were determined to satisfy their long fast before they got to the larkspur. They crowded them with the horses, dismounted and kicked and clubbed them. Chuck got a rope on the bellwether and dragged him by hand to the patch of larkspur. That helped a lot. Finally, the whole flock was cropping the forage, made up mostly of the larkspur. When the fact finally got into what served the sheep for brains, they settled down to make up for lost time. They did not have to be tended.

Owen rode up. In his arms he held a young sheep. His face was solemn. He dropped the sheep and scrubbed his hands on his pants.

"Fred, ride over here where we can see the valley," he said. "Wanta show you something." He closed his jaws tightly.

Milnor followed Owen to an outjut of land which commanded a view of the valley.

Owen pointed.

Down Milnor's look went, over the chaparral-blanketed slope, over the bare, brown, barren lower reaches to the oak-dotted valley floor. Milnor squinted under lowered lids, gazed long, then turned to Owen.

"We see the dust stirred up by walking sheep."

"Thousands of 'em, Fred, all headed this way. Enough damn sheep to eat up all our range and the pine trees to boot."

"Yep, you're right, Chuck." Milnor frowned.

"How in hell are we agoin' to get rid of all them sheep? Me, I don't figure to pack 'em off one by one slung over my saddle horn."

"Maybe you won't have to, Chuck," Milnor replied. "We sure got to get rid of the sheep. Well, I got a hunch, a' ace in the hole, though maybe it's a deuce. Dunno. We'll bring in Bill, then I'll go look-see my hunch." He reined his horse around.

"You could tell a feller," Owen grumbled.

"If my hunch works, you'll know soon enough," Milnor said. "If it don't, well, we sure got one hell of a job on our hands."

CHAPTER IX.

DON BENJAMINTO'S SONG.

BILL REED'S body was brought to the meadow camp on the horse April rode from home. The sheep continued to do what they could do best, eat. And their diet was larkspur. Milnor looked at the sun which indicated mid-afternoon. If nothing happened, the flock would have cleaned out the poisonous plant before noon of the next day.

He called to April and when she rode up said: "I'm going on a short

ride. Got a prisoner tied up in the chaparral and got to see how he's making out. Won't be long." He nudged his horse to motion before April could question him.

And all she had time to say before Milnor spurred to a lope was: "Now, you be careful."

Milnor grinned and knew he would be as careful as circumstance permitted. He came to the vicinity where he had left his prisoner. He forced his horse into the chaparral and, after a short hunt, found his man who sat up, a hopeless expression in his eyes.

"Can you stand up, feller."

The man made an attempt and failed. Milnor leaned from saddle, reached down, grasped him by the collar and pulled him to his feet. Milnor loosed the gag and cut the prisoner's wrists free. He pulled back while the man freed his ankles. He stood up and looked at Milnor and tried to hide his bare leg behind the one that was clothed.

"You're back in circulation," Milnor said. "I'll show you where your boots are and then you'll come along with me to your horse. Got a job for you."

"Job?" said the other. "I don't savvy, mister."

"You will. Just don't try to duck out." Milnor touched his gun.

With the prisoner shod, Milnor directed him to go in the way the sheep had gone. When they arrived at the scene of the battle, Milnor took him about until he had seen the bodies of Slim, Quinn, and Mundo.

"Just showed you," Milnor explained, "so you'd know who was giving orders. Savvy?"

"Yes, sir."

"Git along, then, to your horses. Say, the little Mexican with the guitar was along, wasn't he?"

"Yes, sir."

Milnor knew Benjaminto had come, because of the extra horse and the guitar, and the reason he was there was to talk with Benjaminto. A man that looked as sad as the little Mexican must have a grievance, so Milnor reasoned.

Beyond Mundo's body, they followed the ravine until they came to the natural box where the flock had been held. At one side of the entrance to the box canyon was a small, level recess where the four horses were tied to scrub oaks.

The little Mexican sat with elbows resting upon his knees and his head held in his hands. He did not arouse at the quiet approach of Milnor's horse.

"Don Benjaminto!" Milnor called.

The little Mexican jumped upright. He blinked his eyes rapidly, shrank back. He looked about like a trapped animal.

"I want to talk to you about sheep."

"Sheep, señor?" He looked from Milnor to the man with one pants leg and nodded to the latter. "Sheep. Yes."

"Go on," Milnor said, anxious to know what speech would come next.

"The sheep, many of them, half or more, are mine, señor." Waving his hands violently, Benjaminto went on rapidly. "Things are bad in my country, but no so bad as here. Señor Mundo he—he—talk me to bring my sheep here. I hear the shots and I am frighten. I——"

Milnor interrupted. "You own a lot of the flocks that are headin' up this way."

"*Si; si.*"

"Will you take your sheep and all the rest back to Mexico if I give you the chance?"

Benjaminto considered, his

twisted face lined with fear and trouble.

"But, Señor Mundo?"

"Mundo is dead."

"Dead!"

"Deader'n a skinned sheep," put in the man with one pants leg who had winded the drift of Milnor's talk and knew he was safe, therefore cheerful.

Benjaminto stared in wonder.

"How many herders have you?" Milnor asked.

"Thirty. Maybe thirty-five. Juan know exact."

"All right, Don Benjaminto, you have men enough to take your sheep and all Mundo's sheep out of the country?"

Benjaminto smiled and yet it was a sad smile. He felt this young Americano was his friend, that he had given him his life which Mundo would have taken.

"I will do my best, señor," he promised.

"Look here, funny pants," Milnor said to his erstwhile prisoner. "You ride with Don Benjaminto and do what he tells you. Tell those sheep-herders to turn back the flocks and drive 'em to Mexico."

"Most of 'em are Mexicans," said "Funny pants." "They'll do what Benjaminto tells 'em."

"That's what the doctor ordered," Milnor said. "One thing more, Benjaminto, up at the meadow, eating off the larkspur, are a flock of your sheep. You'd better send a man for 'em."

"*Si, si, señor.*"

"And tell me what became of the dogs, Remo and Fiel?"

"Señor Mundo shot them," Benjaminto said. "He became feared of them. He had to shoot Remo twice." He spread his hands. "It was a—a—shame. They were very good dogs. But, señor, if the dogs were not killed, your people could not have run the sheep."

That was true, Milnor knew, but his face darkened as he thought of the faithful dogs.

"I'll be watching in the morning to see that the sheep are turned back," he said, with bitterness.

"They will turn back," Benjaminto promised solemnly. "And I will send men to take that flock from the *vega*, the meadow, señor."

"Have your men there by sunup."

"*Si, señor.*"

"Adios," Milnor said and turned his horse.

"It may please God that I shall see you soon," Benjaminto said.

"I shall be glad to see you, señor," Milnor called back.

HE didn't know if he had won or not, but he felt he had done a fair day's work. And in that frame of mind, he rode back to the meadow.

The sheep were grazing. He watched them a while and remarked to April who had come to join them.

"I figure I can eat as much and as fast as they do."

"You'll have the chance to eat," April said. "I brought a little grub and I've looked over the cache you left. I hope you like beans."

"I love 'em," Milnor claimed.

Chuck rode up, grinning broadly.

"I been watchin' them sheep feed," he said. "They chisel off the feed plumb down below the root crown, and, what their teeth miss, they cut up with their hoofs. Say, a rabbit couldn't feed after 'em."

"How do they like the larkspur?"

"Like it! Say, it's pie to 'em the way they go after it."

Milnor watched the sheep a few moments.

"Somebody ought to ride to the herd and tell Hi all's well," he said.

"Guess I'm elected," Owen said, "unless you figure they can fix your leg better'n it is."

"They'll be too busy to monkey with my leg. Go on, Chuck, and you can be back by sundown."

"We'll mind the sheep and have grub ready for you," April said. "Maybe you'd better not say anything about me, though."

"You say she's here, and O. K.," Milnor decided.

Owen lost no time in starting on his errand, he was glad to be the bearer of good tidings.

Milnor listened until the hoofbeats of his horse faded from hearing.

"Hope he don't swing too wide a loop," he remarked.

"What do you care, Fred?" April said and smiled. "You get off your horse and rest."

Milnor swung from saddle and gingerly rested his weight upon his game leg. The leg was unsteady. He dropped the reins over the horse's head and sat down.

"Feels good," he said.

"You keep on feeling good and I'll get the grub."

"Too early. Sit down, April, and help me rest."

"I'd help you do any——" There she stopped and put a hand over her mouth. Her face flamed.

Seeing her embarrassment, Milnor was embarrassed, too.

After a while, he managed to say: "You don't have to feel that way. What I did was just in the day's work."

She nodded. Thankfully, Milnor thought, but she was restless. At last she could stand it no longer.

"I have to do something. I can chop wood," she said.

Milnor wouldn't stand for that. They compromised by April dragging in dead pine limbs which Milnor cut with the ax. He was unsteady on his legs and the task required much time. They did not mind.

When the sunset colors flooded the sky, Owen had not returned. They waited until driven by hunger to eat. They kept the fire alive and its ruddy glow lay upon the meadow and tinged the pine trees with its redness. The sheep were quiet, insect voices were hushed and there was not a sound at all, near or far. In the air was the aroma of the pines.

Milnor watched the firelight play fitfully across April's face.

"What are you thinking, April?"

"Oh, many things. For one, how quiet and peaceful it is here. Wouldn't it be nice if it were always like this?"

"I dunno. It's mighty pleasant, but it might get sort of tiresome. You know——"

"Know what, Fred?"

"Aw, just nothin', I guess."

"But there was something."

There was, but Milnor did not know how to express his thoughts. He pulled down his hat so its brim would shadow his face. He could not give tongue to what he wanted to say.

APRIL watched him, sighed and tossed a pine cone upon the fire. Shot up a fairy tree of sparks and small slashes of light. The pine cone gave forth black smoke soon followed by small, sputtering flames.

"Listen!" April said in a whisper.

Milnor listened, looked at the nearest pine tree, the needles of which were motionless. There was no breeze.

"Music," April said.

Milnor nodded.

"A guitar," she said.

"Benjaminto!" Milnor murmured under his breath.

He reached for his gun, felt ashamed of the impulse and let the weapon alone.

The strumming of the guitar became louder. There was no tune, only a succession of soft chords.

Milnor stood up, making two trials before he gained his feet.

"Don Benjaminto!" he called.

"*Si, señor.* I come."

Slowly the little Mexican walked into the firelight. He halted on the side of the fire away from April and Milnor. Lazily, his fingers touched the strings of his instrument. As he talked, he played softly no tune at all, sometimes chords, sometimes little runs like the quick pattering of feet, and sometimes single notes. When he spoke, the guitar followed his voice.

"I come, señor, to tell you all the sheep go 'way to-morrow," he said. "I come with two—two—— What you call *guardas de las ovejas?*"

"Sheep-herders," Milnor supplied.

"*Si, gracias.* They will care for this flock. They will do what you want when you want. They are here near by, and I, señor, will remain, too."

"That's mighty fine, Don Benjaminto. I sure appreciate it."

"And I, señor, appreciate that you give to me my sheep and"—the guitar was silent—"my life. For that I have no words to thank you." He put down the guitar, walked around the fire, and pulled at the finger of his left hand. "Señorita, accept this." Green fires flashed as he extended his hand.

April looked at the ring resting in the palm of her hand.

"But I can't take this! It is too valuable." She tried to give it back.

"The value is nothing." He returned to his guitar and picked it up. "It is very old. It has belonged to my family for hundreds of years. *La señorita* who wear that shall be happy in marriage."

"You should give it to your——"

"The girls laugh at me," Benjaminto murmured and turned his face away. His fingers touched the guitar which gave out a savage sound. While the notes were still growling within the sound box, he turned to Milnor. "Señor, you play the guitar? No?"

Milnor shook his head.

"Then I will play for you, a love song. It is a song of my country, but it will do for any country."

The Mexican's long fingers began to touch the strings gently and softly. Slowly he began to walk toward the shadows.

The music flowed back. There was longing in it, the longing of a loving heart for another heart. Milnor could almost supply the words. He was held spellbound. The music changed. The guitar began to tell yearningly of love and hesitatingly. The theme grew more sure, bolder, broke into a triumphant strain, changed again into what was almost a lullaby. Sweetly the melody continued to fade so gradually that Milnor was not sure when it ended for it lingered in his mind.

Then he became aware that April stood by his side. His hand sought hers and found it.

"That was a pretty song, April."

"Yes, but, Fred, I thought a song had to have words."

"It did to me."

"What were they?"

"Mainly, I love you."

"Why, Fred!"

"The song said it, and I say it, too."

Sounded a sharp snap behind them. They turned quickly about.

There stood Hiram Croft. He kicked aside a small, dry pine branch.

"Heard the guitar when I rode up," he explained, "so I left my horse and snuck up here. Wasn't intendin' to eavesdrop, but I didn't know what was goin' on." He drew a deep breath.

"I heard most of the Mexican talk," he went on. "Chuck told me a lot so I savvy pretty well what's happened. Chuck was tired so I came back in his place. I ain't agoin' to try to thank you, Fred, but I ain't forgettin'. Looks like we're all set to bring up the herd. Get here 'bout the middle of the mornin'. Fred, do you figure the sheep will have what's left of the larkspur chawed up by then?"

"I'm sure of it."

Croft nodded. "Pretty tune the little Mexican played, wasn't it?"

"Sure was, Hi."

"Reminds me." Croft looked at his daughter who, with downcast eyes, was gazing into the fire. "April, you look just exactly as your mother did twenty-two years ago." A smile came to his lips. "April, do you love Fred?"

"Oh! Why—why of course!"

"That's all right, then. I heard him say he loved you. That sure was a pretty tune. I'll go get my horse. Brought my blankets and we'll bed down here. I'll be gone 'bout fifteen minutes. See you later."

Abruptly, he turned and walked toward the chute.

The fire crackled and its light flickered and danced.

"Fred?"

"I know what's in your mind, April, but there's no use my saying anything. I can't say it right. Anyhow, I don't have to, 'cause you know."

That was when actions counted much better than words.

WESTERN CATTLE REPORTS

ON the whole, Western cattle were in good state, according to a report made in January. Weather conditions during December were favorable, but the early January snows were hard on cattle in the areas where feed was short. Generally speaking, cattle were found in good flesh except in the severe drought areas. Feed had to be shipped to eastern Oregon, Washington, California, eastern Montana, the western Dakotas and northeastern Wyoming. Some of the sections which had short ranges were well supplied with hay and some concentrates which were shipped to them.

During December and January the condition of cattle was 82 per cent of normal, compared with 85 per cent shown the previous year, and 72 per cent two years ago. The ten-year average, (1927-1936) was 84.1 per cent.

Stock sheep were reported in fairly good condition except in the northern drought areas and a few sections of California. December weather conditions were favorable for desert sheep ranges and ewe bands did well. There was a general tendency to hold ewe lambs where feed supplies were ample. Texas, for instance, marketed only a small portion of their lamb crop. Early California lambs had a poor start with much feeding in northern areas. The condition of sheep and lambs was given as 86 per cent of normal, compared with 85 per cent a year ago, and 76 per cent two years ago. The ten-year average, (1927-1936) was 86.8 per cent.

Peaceful Peters

By W. C. TUTTLE

Author of "The Golden Vein," etc.

WHEN young "Peaceful" Peters rode into the town of Badger Butte, he owned a silver-trimmed riding rig, a palomino stallion, worth a thousand dollars, and inside the slicker, tied behind his saddle, was twelve hundred dollars in currency.

Peaceful was twenty-three years of age, six feet tall, lean as a greyhound and just as active. Women had told Peaceful that he was handsome, but that did not interest him —much. Love, except such as he bestowed upon Diablo, the palomino, had had little to do with Peaceful Peters.

He had sold a string of horses, belonging to "Wranglin' Bill" Steers and himself, and was now on his way to join Wranglin' in the town of Piñon City, a hundred miles to the westward. Peaceful had "poker money" in his pockets, but carried the bulk of his wealth inside his slicker, where no one would expect it to be carried.

Badger Butte was no better, nor worse, than a dozen other cow towns, which Peaceful had explored in a week. There were false-fronted buildings, no paint, and plenty of dust. A ramshackle courthouse indicated that Badger Butte was the county seat. A sand-scoured sign indicated the sheriff's office, connected with the adobe jail.

Peaceful tied his palomino at a hitch rack near the Dead Line Saloon, and entered the place. Being just before dark, there was little activity in the gambling room. The bartender recommended a little café farther down the street, when Peaceful inquired about getting a meal.

Big, good-natured Dan Hilton, the sheriff, his sombrero on the back of his head, was eating at one of the tables. He nodded pleasantly to Peaceful, glanced quizzically at Peaceful's tied-down holster, shifted his eyes back to the bronzed face of the young man for a moment, and went on eating. Peaceful, according to Hilton's snap judgment, had all the earmarks of a young man who might be dangerous in a showdown.

The sheriff left the café about the time Peaceful started eating, and it had been dark almost an hour when Peaceful left the café. There were no street lights in Badger Butte, except for lamp-lighted windows along the rickety wooden sidewalks.

Peaceful strolled into the Dead Line Saloon, entirely at peace with the world. In a few minutes he would find a room for the night, and then stable Diablo. After that he might try a few hands of poker and see if Lady Luck was still riding the trail with him.

The sheriff and two other men were standing near the bar, as he came in. The sheriff glanced sharply at the bartender, who nodded shortly, and then became very industrious with a wet bar towel on the polished top of the bar. As Peaceful started past the sheriff, heading toward the gambling room, he came to an abrupt stop, with the muzzle of the sheriff's Colt .45 prodding him sharply in the middle. As Peaceful instinctively lifted his hands, one of the other men reached over and deftly removed Peaceful's gun from his holster.

"To me," stated Peaceful quietly, "this proceedin' is remarkable."

"We do remarkable things, feller," replied the man who took Peaceful's gun. "Such as arrestin' horse thieves. Queer, ain't it?"

"Kinda queer," agreed Peaceful. "'Specially, when I'm no thief."

"Can yuh imagine that?" gawped the third one of the party, a scrawny, undersized person, with a cavernous mouth and decayed teeth. "Mebbe he's got a eddicated saddle, which crawled on my hawse, when nobody's lookin'!"

"It still don't make sense," said Peaceful.

"I'm sorry, kid," said the sheriff. "Sam"—he turned to the scrawny one—"you get that lantern."

Armed with the lantern, Sam Harris led the way out to the hitch rack, where several horses were tied. Lantern light glinted on Peaceful's saddle and bridle, but the horse was most certainly not Diablo; it was a long-legged sorrel, wearing the Circle H brand on its left hip.

"I been lookin' for the hairpin that stole m' sorrel," said Harris. "Looked all over the country—and I finds him a-standin' right here, wearin' a dude rig."

"It's shore queer," said Peaceful. "When I left that saddle and bridle they were decoratin' a palomino stallion, worth a thousand dollars. Now I find that a thousand dollars' worth of horseflesh has turned into a two-bit buzzard-head which ain't fit for magpie bait."

"I've heard a lotta funny excuses by horse thieves; so you'll excuse me if I don't laugh," said "Booger" Allen, the deputy. "You seem to have plenty of gall, but damn little

sense. Ridin' a stolen horse right into town this a way—where everybody knows the horse."

PEACEFUL laughed shortly. He realized the futility of his position. Some one had stolen his palomino, shifted the saddle and bridle to a stolen horse, and left Peaceful Peters to face the dire consequences.

"I reckon there ain't much left to be said," observed the sheriff.

"I've explained my position in the matter," said Peaceful quietly.

"Yeah, it might amuse a cowtown jury," grinned the deputy, "but to me it's jest another horse thief tryin' to be smart."

Smack! With a move as quick as the striking of a rattler, Peaceful Peters hit Booger Allen, the deputy, flush in the mouth. Allen was falling, when the sheriff's powerful arms were wrapped around Peaceful, preventing any further action. A moment later a pair of handcuffs connected Peaceful with the sheriff.

Booger Allen got to his feet, dazed and bleeding, mouthing imprecations against Peaceful Peters.

"Jest take it easy, Booger," said the sheriff quietly. "You done pleaded for a sock in the face—and yuh got it. C'mon, son, I've got to put yuh in jail."

"All right, sheriff. But will yuh take that slicker off my saddle and bring it along?"

"Why, shore. You ain't afraid of our jail roof leakin', are yuh?"

"No," smiled Peaceful, "but inside that slicker is twelve hundred dollars in paper money—and I'd hate to lose it."

"Twelve hundred!" gasped Sam Harris. "In that old slicker?"

"Yeah, that's right," drawled Peaceful. "Somebody shore overlooked a good bet."

The four men went down to the sheriff's office, with Booger Allen bringing up the rear, grumbling painfully over loosened teeth.

As a lamp was lighted, a girl came into the office, stopped just inside the doorway, looking quizzically at the prisoner.

She was Lorna Hilton, daughter of the big sheriff, looking very much like a small, very handsome young cowboy in her overalls, high-heel boots, flannel shirt and sombrero. Peaceful started to reach for his hat, but the handcuff jerked his arm back.

"Be with yuh in a few minutes, honey," said the sheriff.

"That's all right, dad! I'll be back in a few minutes."

She turned her head and looked directly at Peaceful for several moments, before stepping outside. The big sheriff chuckled, as he led Peaceful back to one of the small cells, where he locked him in safely.

"That's my kid," he informed Peaceful proudly. "She helps me keep my house—and a little bit of the Ten Commandments. We live about two miles out of town."

"She looks like somebody yuh could be proud to know," said Peaceful soberly.

"Oh, you'll prob'ly know her," chuckled the sheriff. "I ain't never had a prisoner here yet that she didn't plumb spoil—bringin' pie and cake and all that sort of stuff. Age, color nor crime never makes any difference to Lorna."

"How long before I get a trial?" asked Peaceful.

"You'll get a preliminary hearin' in the mornin'. And then you'll be bound over to the Superior Court,

which won't operate for two, three months yet."

"Great guns! Have I got to wait that long?"

"Yeah, I'm afraid yuh have, son. I've allus contended that we should post notices, showin' jest when court convenes; so that horse thieves can manage to git themselves caught at the last moment. Save the county a lot of money, too. Well, *buenas noches.*"

In the days that followed—mighty long days, too, for Peaceful Peters—he got acquainted with Lorna Hilton, who brought him pies, cookies and cake, for which he was extremely grateful. The jail fare of Badger Butte was none too good. Possibly Booger Allen saw to that. Acting as jailer, it was his duty to provide two meals a day for the prisoner.

Booger told Peaceful that he and Lorna were engaged. Booger was less than thirty, not unhandsome in a colorless way. His hair was thin and of a sandy hue, his mouth small and weak. Peaceful asked Lorna about it, but she slipped away, laughing over the question.

Lorna did not come back for several days, and Peaceful was afraid he had hurt her feelings. But she finally came back, bearing an apple pie. Big Dan Hilton stood in the corridor doorway, joining in the conversation, until Booger Allen came into the office, when he went back to his desk.

Peaceful could hear that an argument was going on, but did not know what it was about. When Lorna went into the office he could hear the argument continued, with an occasional word from Lorna. Evidently Lorna left in a few minutes, but the argument continued. Part of it became audible, when the sheriff came over near the corridor doorway.

"No, yuh ain't goin' to do that, Booger," said the sheriff firmly. "The prisoner ain't got a thing to do with it. If Lorna wants to bring him a pie—that's her business."

"But, damn it, Dan, everybody in town is talkin' about it," complained the deputy.

"They ain't talked to me about it."

"You'd be the last one they'd talk to. But they tell me. They all think I'm engaged to Lorna; so they—well——"

"Well, you ain't got that to worry yuh now," said the sheriff, a chuckle in his voice. "She shore told yuh a few things. And, Booger, I don't mind tellin' yuh that I feel a lot like she does. Oh, I know—I gave my consent two months ago—but not now. You shot off yore face too much. The time to make yore brag-talks is after yuh marry the girl. You go around spinnin' windys, tellin' this and that—and it gits back to the girl. I don't blame Lorna for tossin' yuh into the discard."

Booger's reply, if any, was cut off from Peaceful, when the sheriff gently closed the door. Peaceful leaned against his bars and smiled. He was not in love with Lorna—at least, he didn't believe he was. But his heart was singing over the knowledge that Lorna was not going to marry Booger Allen.

A QUEER nickname—Booger. Lorna had explained that the deputy was spooky; afraid of ghosts, afraid of empty houses, and believed in bad-luck omens and signs.

"He would ride miles rather than to go past a graveyard, even in daylight," Lorna explained.

Next day the sheriff received a telegram from the warden at the penitentiary, which read:

ROD HARRIS ESCAPED YESTERDAY STOP WATCH FOR HIM

The sheriff read it carefully, folded it up and shoved it deep in his pocket. "Rod" Harris was a killer, and it just happened that he was a brother to Sam Harris, the cattleman whose horse Peaceful Peters was supposed to have stolen. Rod had not been sent up from that county, but there was a possibility that he might contact his brother.

Lorna did not come that day, nor did the sheriff mention the argument with Booger. The deputy's line of sarcasm was just as pronounced, as he brought the midday meal to Peaceful. He did mention that they were all out of pie.

Just before dark that evening, while Peaceful was sprawled on his little bunk, smoking a cigarette, an object was flung through the bars of his window and clattered against the end of the iron bunk. It was a tightly folded piece of paper, attached to a small rock.

Peaceful opened it quickly and read the penciled note. It said:

If you agree to this proposition throw this note back through the window. I've got a scheme for some big money and we need your help. To-morrow evening some saws will be tossed into your cell. Them bars are iron. Cut your way out. There will be a saddled horse staked out behind the sheriff's stable, with a loaded gun tied to the saddle. At the north end of town is a trail leading north to a water-tank on the railroad. Wait for us there and we will explain the deal. It's a big money job.

There was no signature. Peaceful folded the note, tied it to the rock and tossed it through the window. While he was guiltless of any crime, Peaceful realized that the cards were stacked against him. A Badger Butte jury would not even leave the jury box to convict him. His only chance was escape. At least, he could listen to the schemes of the men who were willing to help him escape, and if they did not appeal to him, he could always turn them down.

In a way, Peaceful hated to do this to big Dan Hilton. The sheriff had been friendly and kind to him, but had often told Peaceful that his conviction was as sure as death and taxes. Two years in the penitentiary was the least he could expect.

It was after dark next evening, when the saws were thrown through the bars, and with them was a small hack-saw handle. Within an hour Peaceful had cut and bent aside enough bars to enable him to crawl through.

He dropped to the ground in the inky darkness of the narrow alley, where he crouched quietly for a while, before working his way slowly back to the sheriff's little stable. The saddled horse was out there, and the loaded Colt .45 was tied to the saddle horn. Quietly he got into the saddle, circled the town, and after a little searching he discovered the trail leading north. He looked back at the huddle of tiny lights, which marked Badger Butte, and smiled in the darkness. Free again, with a horse under him, and a big Colt in his right hand.

"It won't take 'em long to forget one horse thief," he said.

That night Wranglin' Bill Steers came to Badger Butte, riding in on a jaded horse, which he stabled. After promising to cut the ears off the stableman, if he didn't feed that horse all the oats he could eat, Wranglin' Bill ate his own fill at the

Chinaman's place, after which he went to the Dead Line Saloon, his old hat over one eye, his spurs rasping belligerently.

Wranglin' Bill was six feet three inches tall, and would weigh about two hundred pounds. He had a long, horselike face, drooping mustache and bilious eyes. His arms were long, and attached to his bony wrists were freckled hands the size of picnic hams.

It was about midnight, when Wranglin' Bill entered the Dead Line. Business was very good, it seemed. One of the "girls" singled out Wranglin' Bill as her own discovery. He placed a huge paw on her corn-colored top knot and announced in a voice which shook the very rafters:

"Keep plumb away from me, Chicky-dee. I eat bigger ones than you are three times a day—fried."

"I'm bigger than you think," declared the girl.

"Hell, no!" roared Wranglin' Bill. "Thar ain't nothin' on earth bigger than I think."

Wranglin' shoved her aside and went up to the bar. Booger Allen and Sam Harris were with a group at the bar, looking with slight amusement at the giant cowpuncher. Wranglin' Bill looked them over coldly. Finally he noticed the insignia of office on the lapel of Booger's vest.

"Deppity sheriff, eh?" he growled. "Well, mebbe yuh can do me some good."

"What seems to be yore ailment, stranger?" asked Booger.

"Hawse trouble."

"Somebody steal yore horse?"

"Somebody," declared Wranglin' Bill, his eyes slowly searching the faces about him, "done stole my pardner's hawse. I jist finished ridin' a hundred miles, a-lookin' for that thief; and I've promised m'self that I won't be disappointed."

"What kind of a horse?" queried Booger importantly.

"Palomino stud, wearin' a Circle Lazy K on left shoulder."

"Ain't seen no horse like that around here."

"Prob'ly not," agreed Wranglin' Bill. "Reasons why is—'cause he ain't around here. He's a hundred miles from here—locked up safe."

"Then what in hell are you doin' here?"

"I'm a-lookin' for the thief, I told yuh."

"Wait'll I git this straight," said Booger. "You've got the horse, all locked up safe, a hundred miles from here. And yo're here, lookin' for the thief? Who'd you git the horse from?"

"The feller that had him. Says he bought him for a hundred dollars. He didn't want to talk about it. Said he'd rather give up the hawse than to argue about it. But I jest love to argue about hawses; so me and him has a contest. Two days later the doctor let me swap a couple words with him, and he said he bought the hawse from a feller from Badger Butte. He didn't know this man's name. Well, I left the hawse in the sheriff's care, and left the feller in the hospital. That's the whole story, except the part that says—The End."

"What's yore pardner's name?" asked one of the men.

"Peaceful Peters."

"Hell! Why, that's the feller they've got in jail!"

"That's right," agreed Booger quickly. "By golly, mebbe he wasn't lyin' about that palomino stallion."

"I crave a little fast talkin'," said Wranglin' Bill tensely. "Do you-all

mean to stand thar and tell me Peaceful's in yore jail? Well, I'm a-listenin'."

AS quickly as possible, Booger Allen told Wranglin' Bill all about Peaceful Peters, while the big man leaned against the bar, yanking at his huge mustache, his eyes squinting thoughtfully. At the conclusion of Booger's explanation, Wranglin' Bill grunted explosively.

"Tryin' t' railroad my pardner, eh? Well! I'm glad I come."

"Yore testimony might help him," said Booger meekly.

"Help him! Know who I am? No? I'm Wranglin' Bill Steers."

"Never heard of yuh, Mr. Steers," said Booger.

"Oh, that's right," murmured the big man. "I ain't never been here before. If I ever come back, yuh won't forget me. Well, what the hell! Lead me down to see m' pardner! I crave conversation with him."

"Pretty late now," replied Booger, glancing at the clock.

"I wasn't askin' about the time," remarked Wranglin' Bill coldly. "You'll either take me down there and let me talk with Peaceful, or you'll wake up in the mornin' and find that I've done took all the walls away from yore jail. And when I take away the walls, I jest let the roof take care of itself."

"I reckon we better do it the easy way," grinned Booger.

Several curious bystanders went along, being rather amused at the roaring manner of Wranglin' Bill, and also interested in the turn of affairs of Peaceful Peters, who was already convicted, as far as the testimony was concerned.

The sheriff's office was in darkness, but the door was unlocked.

"Kinda queer," muttered Booger. "Dan allus keeps it locked at night."

He stumbled over something, as he headed for a lamp.

"I smell powder smoke," said one of the men. "Kinda faint, but I——"

The lamp flared up, illuminating the rough office. Sprawled on his back in the middle of the floor was Dan Hilton, the sheriff. Just beyond his body was the office safe, the door wide open. One look at the sheriff's bloodless face and wide, staring eyes, proved that he was beyond mortal help. He had been shot through the heart, and the gun muzzle had been held so close to his body that the flame of the burning powder had seared his shirt.

"That's why nobody heard the shot," whispered Booger. "Muffled agin' his clothes. Now, who the hell done that, I wonder?"

"And the safe wide open," said a man.

"Wait a minute!" snapped Booger. He picked up the lamp, yanked open the corridor door, and the men followed him back to the cells.

"He's gone!" snapped Sam Harris. "Cut the bars and got away!"

Wranglin' Bill stood around quietly and watched them examine the cut bars. He seemed stunned over the fact that Peaceful was gone. And these men were saying that Peaceful had escaped, murdered the sheriff, and robbed the safe.

"I dunno what was in the safe," Booger was saying. "Peaceful Peters's gun was in the desk, but it's gone now."

They lighted a lantern and went out to the stable.

"His saddle and bridle and my brown mare—gone," said Booger.

They went back to the office.

"No use tryin' to do anythin' in the dark," said Sam Harris.

"Send one of the boys for Doc

Havens," ordered Booger. "He's the coroner. Bein' a doctor won't help poor Dan Hilton. Lemme see-e-e." Booger looked over the several men, finally selecting Sam Harris. "I'll deputize yuh to go with me, Sam," he said quietly. "It's jist a hunch—and two men are enough. Mebbe I'll want more of yuh in the mornin'."

"I reckon I'll find me a bed," muttered Wranglin' Bill. "Feelin' kinda tuckered out."

Fifteen minutes later Booger Allen and Sam Harris rode out of town.

Peaceful Peters had no difficulty in locating the water tank, which reared its top above the mesquite. He dismounted and tied his horse in the brush, screened from both tank and railroad. Afterward he sat down on a section of squared timber beside the tank and enjoyed a smoke. He felt sure that there would be no pursuit before morning, when his absence would be noted. He decided to wait there a reasonable time, and if the men did not put in an appearance, he would mount and ride on.

False dawn was silvering the tops of the mesquite, when he heard the rails humming from the approach of a train. He was concealed from the train, but was a bit apprehensive, when it drew to a stop. The spout creaked, as the fireman drew it down to the tender, and he could hear the gush of water leaving the tall tank. As he peered around the corner, he saw a dim figure detach itself from the train and drop into the heavy shadow, until the train went on. Then the man got to his feet and came over to the tank. He seemed to be wearing an overcoat, or some sort of coat, which covered him entirely.

He started sharply, when Peaceful spoke to him, but came on, when he saw Peaceful in the half-light. The man was about the same size and weight as Peaceful.

"Damn brakeman lookin' to kick me off," he told Peaceful. "They don't mind bustin' yuh over the head with a club. Got any tobacco, pardner?"

"Shore—plenty," replied Peaceful, and reached for his pocket.

At that same moment the stranger lunged forward, swinging an object in his right hand, which collided with the side of Peaceful's head, and Peaceful went down like a pole-axed steer. The man grunted and tossed the rock aside.

THEN he proceeded to strip Peaceful to his underclothes, removed his own clothes, and swiftly dressed himself in Peaceful's clothes. He did not bother to dress Peaceful, but dumped him and the discarded clothes on the railroad side of the tank, after tying Peaceful's hands with his handkerchief.

"That'll hold yuh long enough to suit me," he said, testing the balance of Peaceful's .45, and finding it exactly right.

Peaceful was conscious but still dazed badly. He realized that the man had traded clothes with him. The man asked Peaceful where his horse was tied, but Peaceful failed to answer.

"Hell, I'll find the horse all right."

The man walked around to the other side of the tank, stopped short. Peaceful heard him mutter a curse. From a little distance came:

"Pour it into him, damn him!"

For a moment there was absolute quiet, broken by the metallic *click!* of a pistol hammer falling on a dead cartridge or empty chamber. Then came the whiplike report of a rifle, once, twice, three times, followed by

the smashing report of a short-barrel shotgun. It was so close that Peaceful could almost feel the concussion.

Then a man laughed harshly. Short, nervous steps on the gravel, and a man's voice saying:

"You shore fixed his face! Blowed his damn head off!"

"Yeah, and I didn't do it all. At least one of them .30-30 soft-nose bullets hit him in the face. The horse is right over there in the brush. We'll pack him up and git goin'. Grab his feet."

They were not over a dozen feet from Peaceful, until they moved away with the body. It did not take Peaceful long to ruin his handkerchief bonds. The man had taken his high-heel boots, and left in their place a pair of clumsy shoes. He examined the shirt and pants—a peculiar color of gray—and it dawned upon him that they were convict garb. The long coat was something the man had secured to cover the prison gray. The cap was a greasy, nondescript article, which Peaceful tossed aside.

There was a sizable lump on the side of his head, but the skin had not been broken. Gingerly he put on the clothes, realizing that he was making a legitimate target of himself—but that wind was cold. He went around to the scene of the shooting. There was blood on the wall of the tank, and blood on the gravel. Lying, half buried in the sand, was the Colt .45. The men had overlooked the gun.

He shook the sand out of the gun and swung out the cylinder. None of the primers had been dented. Peaceful felt sure that he had heard the hammer snap. Then he drew back the hammer and looked at it closely. The firing pin had been filed off! It would have been impossible to fire the gun. Peaceful drew a deep breath.

"They sent me out here to die," he said slowly. "Gave me a gun that wouldn't go off—the murderin' sidewinders!"

Peaceful sat down and reviewed his predicament. If any one saw him in prison garb they would either kill or capture him. It might be easy to prove that he was not an escaped convict, but he would still be facing a horse-stealing charge.

"It's a cinch I won't git far in these clothes," he told himself, "so I might just as well go back to Badger Butte and see what I can find out. Mebbe I'm the craziest cow-puncher on earth—walkin' twelve miles to get myself put in jail —or shot on sight."

Peaceful had never seen the sheriff's little rancho, but he knew just where it was located; so he decided to try and get there, have a talk with the sheriff and tell him the whole story. Just why any one would help him escape from jail, furnish him with a harmless gun—well, it didn't make sense. He knew that the other man had been mistaken for him, and that the combined havoc of both shotgun and soft-nosed rifle bullets prevented them from discovering their mistake.

Wranglin' Bill Steers cried over the remains of the man whom he believed to be Peaceful Peters. Odds and ends in the overall pockets proved that the deceased was Peaceful. A huge English copper coin, on which Peaceful had carved his initials, proved his identity.

"He packed that f'r luck," mourned Wranglin' Bill.

"I had a hunch," explained Booger Allen grimly. "He asked me one day about places where a feller might catch a train. I dunno how

the thing came up, but I told him about that tank, where almost every train made a stop for water. I figured last night that mebbe he would try and pull out on a train, leavin' us to figure he was headin' out on a horse.

"Well, my hunch was right. He was right there, waitin' for a train. He didn't recognize us, until we got mighty close, then he yanked his gun; but it was too late. I dunno where his gun is; mebbe we lost it, comin' back here."

"Well, yuh got the murderin' coyote—and that's enough," remarked one of the men, and the next moment he was sprawled on his back, a dozen feet away, knocked there by Wranglin' Bill's huge right fist.

"I've been a-tryin' to tell m'self that yo're right," said Wranglin' Bill, "but I cain't quite make it. A little voice comes back at me, a-sayin': 'Wranglin' Bill, yo're a liar, and you know yo're a liar. Peaceful Peters never murdered anybody.'"

"Yuh can't git around the evidence," stated Booger Allen.

"Well, I ain't arguin' about it. Evidence is one thing—my own feelin's is another. Think what yuh want to about Peaceful Peters—but don't tell me about it. He's still my bunky—and I might git mean."

"We're havin' a inquest to-morrow mornin'," stated Booger. "Won't do a bit of good, but it's the law. You stayin' for the inquest?"

"Me?" queried Wranglin' Bill. "Why, I done told yuh I came here to find a certain horse thief, didn't I? Might take a couple days. Shore, I'll be here, deppity."

IT was afternoon before Peaceful reached the Hilton place. He had gone slowly, keeping away from the trail, and had finally stopped in the brush near the Hilton stable. There were a couple of wagons, a buggy and several saddle horses near the porch, and Peaceful could see a number of women on the porch. Apparently the Hilton's were having considerable company.

After a time several people got in a wagon and drove away. Finally the other wagon drove away, with three seats occupied. Riders drifted away, until there was only the buggy and single horse remaining. It was the old, sway-backed, hammer-headed gray, belonging to Doctor Havens, the coroner. Peaceful recognized it from a description by Lorna Hilton.

Peaceful wondered if Lorna or her father were sick. Finally he slipped past the stable, screened from the windows, and approached the back door, which was open. He could hear muffled voices, a man's voice and a woman's voice. As he stepped in close to the doorway, Lorna came into the kitchen so quietly that he did not hear her, until they were face to face.

Her eyes snapped wide and every bit of color drained quickly from her face. Shakily she reached for the doorway, and Peaceful grasped her arm.

"You!" she whispered huskily. "You—they said—you're not dead?"

"No," whispered Peaceful. "I'm not dead; I'm all right."

"Well, what in the world is this?" asked old Doc Havens from the connecting doorway, peering at them over his glasses.

Lorna was unable to speak, and Peaceful merely grinned foolishly.

"Young man, who in the devil might you be?" queried the gaunt old physician.

"I'm Peaceful Peters."

"Yo're who?"

"It is, doctor," whispered Lorna. "It is Peaceful Peters."

"The horse thief, who—well, bless my soul! Young man"—the old doctor's accusing index finger wiggled nervously—"you are dead."

"Suit yourself," replied Peaceful calmly.

"They say that you——" Lorna stopped, her eyes full of tears, her lips trembling. She shook her head, unable to continue. Peaceful looked inquiringly at the old doctor.

"Her father was shot and killed last night," said the doctor quietly. "They say you did it. Booger Allen and Sam Harris caught you at a water tank north of here early this morning, and killed you."

"Dan Hilton—dead?" gasped Peaceful. "Why—I liked him, doc. I wouldn't have harmed Dan Hilton. Why, he—he was Lorna's father."

Lorna looked at Peaceful, her eyes full of tears, her lips compressed. She shook her head, as she managed to say:

"You—didn't."

"Well, I hope to tell yuh I didn't. Wait a minute. Can we sit down? I'm nursin' a lot of blisters, and this talkin' will take time."

Stretched out in a rocker in the main room, Peaceful told them about the note, his escape and what happened at the water tank. He did not have the note to show them. It was only his word against evidence that would surely hang him. But he felt that both Lorna and the doctor realized that he was telling the truth.

"But what can you do?" asked Lorna painfully.

"You might get other clothes and leave the country," suggested the doctor. "No one is looking for Peaceful Peters."

"And let the murderer of Dan Hilton go free?" queried Peaceful. "They tried to murder me, too—remember."

"You'll be running your neck into a noose, young man. You don't know the men of Badger Butte. Nothing on earth can save you."

"Except brains," added Peaceful dryly.

"Well—yes, they might help."

"Will you help me, doc?"

"Help you? Help you do what?"

"Help me put the deadwood where it belongs."

"Well," drawled the old doctor, peering at Peaceful over the tops of his glasses, "I'm only a cow-town doctor—and coroner. I believe in justice, young man; but I'll listen to what you want me to do."

Five minutes later Peaceful Peters relaxed in his chair. Doctor Havens removed his glasses, blew his long nose violently, and proceeded to polish his glasses carefully.

"Bless my soul!" he exclaimed softly. "Bless my soul!"

"I'll do my part," said Lorna huskily. "I'll gladly to it, doctor."

"My goodness!" exclaimed the doctor, a dry chuckle in his voice. He held the glasses up and squinted through them at the light.

"What do yuh say, doc?" asked Peaceful anxiously.

"What do I say? Hm-m-m-m. Better wait until about midnight, before you come to my house. Don't want anybody to see you. Now, if you will yank off those shoes, I'll take a look at the blisters."

INQUESTS were very important events in the minds of Badger Butte folk. Entertainment of any kind was scarce, and hours before inquest time the people came from far and near. Dan Hilton had been a popular peace officer, and they were all anxious to listen to the evidence of his murder.

Because of the large crowd the inquest was held in the big courtroom,

where the two glaringly new pine boxes had been placed on sawhorses on either side of the judge's desk. In one was the body of their beloved sheriff, while the other held the remains of the man who was believed to have killed him, following a jail break.

Long before the inquest was opened, every seat in the house was taken. All eyes followed Lorna Hilton, as she came in with the coroner, who conducted her to a seat inside the railed-off space. Booger Allen and Sam Harris, principal figures in the drama, followed her and sat down within the charmed circle. Wranglin' Bill Steers had a front seat, looking with the gloomy eyes of an old bloodhound at the proceedings.

The jury was quickly chosen and sworn. They were all business men of Badger Butte. Quietly they took their places in the jury box, and the inquest was opened by Doctor Havens. Booger Allen took a seat beside him, where they conversed in whispers.

Doctor Havens removed his glasses and looked the crowd over solemnly for several moments, before he said:

"Folks, there is apparently no question that our friend and sheriff, Dan Hilton, was assassinated in his own office, following the jail break of a prisoner, one Peaceful Peters, who was waiting to be tried for stealing a horse from Sam Harris.

"We have no direct evidence that Peaceful Peters fired the fatal shot. What happened in that office will never be fully known, because both Dan Hilton's lips and Peaceful Peters's lips are sealed forever. We do know that Booger Allen, our deputy sheriff, and Sam Harris overtook the fleeing Peaceful Peters twelve miles from here, at a water tank, where Peaceful Peters, resisting arrest, was shot down. I shall ask that Booger Allen take the stand, be sworn, and tell his story."

Booger Allen was not without dramatic ability. He told them how the body of Dan Hilton was discovered, the discovery of the prisoner's escape, and why he decided to follow Peaceful Peters that night. He told of the shooting at the water tank, and how they had tried to capture Peaceful Peters alive, but to no avail.

"Mr. Allen," said the coroner, "in your opinion did Peaceful Peters hold animosity against Dan Hilton?"

"Hu-u-uh?" gawped Booger.

"Did Peaceful Peters dislike the sheriff—hold a grudge against him?"

"I hope to tell yuh, he did! He told me oncet that if he ever got a chance he'd shore cut down on Dan Hilton. He hated Dan."

Booger Allen was excused. Doctor Havens took a deep breath, shoved his hands deep in his pockets and looked seriously at the crowd.

"I don't know how much you folks understand about the occult," he said slowly. "I do not mean the accepted ideas of ghosts and goblins; I mean the workings of things—spirit things—that are beyond our poor understanding; of things not material. Queer things do happen—things that we cannot fathom, and which must come from some power beyond the grave."

"What are you talkin' about, doc?" asked Booger, his eyes shifting to the two pine boxes.

"If I knew, I would be a very wise man, Booger; very wise, indeed. It is the first thing of its kind I have ever seen. It—well, it rather frightened me—and I am not the sort of a man to frighten easily."

Doctor Havens reached in his

pocket and took out a letter. His grave eyes scanned the crowd for several moments. Then he said quietly:

"This letter was found on a table at Dan Hilton's home, before I came there to break the sad news to Lorna Hilton. It bears no stamp nor postmark. Gentlemen, this letter was written by a man after he was dead."

The crowd gasped with astonishishment. Coming from a man like Doctor Havens there must be some truth in that statement. Booger Allen seemed to have lost much of his color. This was just the sort of thing he did not enjoy hearing.

"Sounds crazy to me," declared Sam Harris. Doctor Havens looked at the scrawny cattleman.

"Harris," he said, "you have a brother in the penitentiary?"

"Yeah—but——" faltered Sam uneasily.

"Did you know he has escaped?"

"No! How'd yuh——"

"The dead man said so in this letter. He escaped last Wednesday."

Of course, Doctor Havens neglected to say that he found the telegram from the penitentiary in one of Dan Hilton's pockets, after the murder.

"Wait a minute," growled Booger, getting to his feet. "What's all this about, anyway? Dead men can't write. That's a lie. Who was he?"

"Peaceful Peters," replied the doctor.

"Hold on a minute," boomed the voice of Wranglin' Bill Steers, as he got slowly to his feet. "Peaceful was my bunky, and I shore savvy his writin'. Yuh cain't fool me none on that."

"Thank you," said Doctor Havens. "Will you come forward and look at the letter, stranger."

WRANGLIN' BILL stepped over the railing and came up to the desk, where he examined the letter closely. Then he lifted his huge head and looked at the crowded courtroom.

"That's Peaceful's writin'," he said huskily. "He's the only person I ever knowed who used all them dewlaps and jingle-bobs on his letters. I swear on the Bible that Peaceful wrote that letter."

"But not after he was dead!" snapped Booger Allen, on his feet now.

"If he did not write it after he was dead," said the doctor, "how on earth could he describe the way in which you killed him?"

"He couldn't!" gasped Booger. "Why, he——" Booger wiped the back of his hand across his mouth, staring at the doctor.

"For the love of Mike, will yuh read that letter?" wailed a nervous person in the crowd.

"Miss Hilton wanted to read it," said the doctor, "but I'm afraid the effort would be too much for her; so I shall read it myself."

The room was so quiet that one could hear flies buzzing on the side windows, as Doctor Havens unfolded the letter. His voice was pitched low, but was audible in all parts of the room, as he read:

"'My name is Peaceful Peters. On June 15th, I came to Badger Butte, riding a valuable palomino stallion. Two men, whom I shall name presently, stole my palomino, placed my riding rig on another horse, and had me arrested for stealing that horse. I was——'"

"Wait a minute!" rasped Sam Harris. "Why, that damn liar is saying——"

"Shut up!" snapped Wranglin' Bill. "Another yap out of you, and I'll wring yore turkey neck."

"Thank you," said Doctor Havens quietly, and began reading:

" 'I was thrown into jail to await trial. Sheriff Hilton was very kind to me at all times. Miss Lorna Hilton was also very kind, and brought me things to eat. This made Deputy Allen very indignant, and he quarreled with both Dan Hilton and his daughter.' "

"That's a dirty lie!" grunted Booger Allen. "I never did. I——" He looked at Lorna, and subsided quickly.

" 'Night before last,' " continued the doctor, " 'a number of saws were dropped through my cell window. There was a note, telling me to saw my way out, take a horse and gun, which were staked out for me, and meet the writer at a water tank, twelve miles north of town. I sawed my way out and went to the water tank.

" 'In the meantime, in order to steal twelve hundred dollars of my money, which was in the sheriff's safe, those two men murdered Sheriff Hilton, followed me to the water tank, and shot me down, after I discovered that they had furnished me with a gun that wouldn't shoot.' "

"That's a lie!" screamed Booger Allen. He and Sam Harris were both on their feet now, like a pair of cornered wolves, teeth bared.

"You can't prove a thing, I tell yuh!" panted Booger. "It's a lie! Peaceful Peters is dead! He's in that box and he——"

Booger Allen was looking directly at one of those pine boxes, the top of which was rising slowly. Half the crowd were on their feet, staring wildly. The top kept coming up—up. They couldn't see what was under it, because the top was lifting toward them.

Then it suddenly slithered down toward them, crashing against a chair, revealing the unmistakable Peaceful Peters, sitting upright, staring at Booger Allen and Sam Harris. Peaceful's face was intact, too.

It was too much for Booger Allen. Screaming like a maniac, he drew his gun, and in his hysteria of fear he came straight toward Peaceful Peters, trying to level his weapon. But Peaceful's right hand, dangling outside the box, held a Colt .45, and that Colt was driving destruction into the legs of Booger Allen. He was afraid to shoot higher for fear of hitting one of the audience.

Booger's one shot tore splinters out of the pine box, before he crashed headlong against the platform, both legs smashed. Sam Harris tried to run, crashed squarely into the arms of Wranglin' Bill Steers, who shook him loose from his gun, slapped him across the chin with one of his hamlike hands—and the fight was over.

Booger Allen was screaming:

"I killed him, damn him—and he came back! I killed Dan Hilton. He was goin' to fire me. The money's under the carpet in my shack. I'm through, I tell yuh! I give up."

"We stole the palomino," babbled Sam Harris. "Dead men—know."

Peaceful stepped over and looked down at Sam Harris.

"I'm not a dead man, Harris," he said slowly. "The man you murdered yesterday mornin' was yore own brother. You shot too quick. He had swapped clothes with me just before you and Booger got there."

Peaceful turned from the staring Harris and shook hands with Wranglin' Bill Steers, who looked at him severely, as he said:

"Son, how many times have I told you not to cut up didoes, when I'm

not around? The first thing you know you'll git in trouble. Crawlin' into caskets and actin' like a dead man—scarin' fits out of folks! Ain't you never goin' to grow up?"

Before Peaceful could frame a reply, Lorna and the doctor came. They shook hands quietly. Lorna's "Thank you, Peaceful," was audible only to him. He looked at Wranglin' Bill, a wistful expression in his eyes, but he quickly shook his head and laughed at the big man.

"We're wastin' time here, Wranglin'," he said. "We should be down on the Rio long before this. Let's find Diablo."

"I got him," mumbled Bill.

"You would." Peaceful smiled confidently at his partner.

CAPTURING WILD HORSES

BECAUSE no stallion will tolerate the presence of geldings in his band, these outcasts that escape annually from the big ranches form small herds and find some isolated mountain park where they remain the year around. Pawing through the snow in winter to uncover the self-cured grass and fighting off their common enemies, the wolves and mountain lions, they become literally as wild as any deer. They become familiar with every secret trail in the vicinity of their hide-out, and also know how to take advantage of the natural obstacles, such as small cliffs not noticeable to the casual observer, patches of down timber, slide rock, swampy spots or impassable gullies cut by spring freshets or water-spouts. Because of their struggle for existence, they are hardier and more sure-footed than the horses ridden by the cowboys.

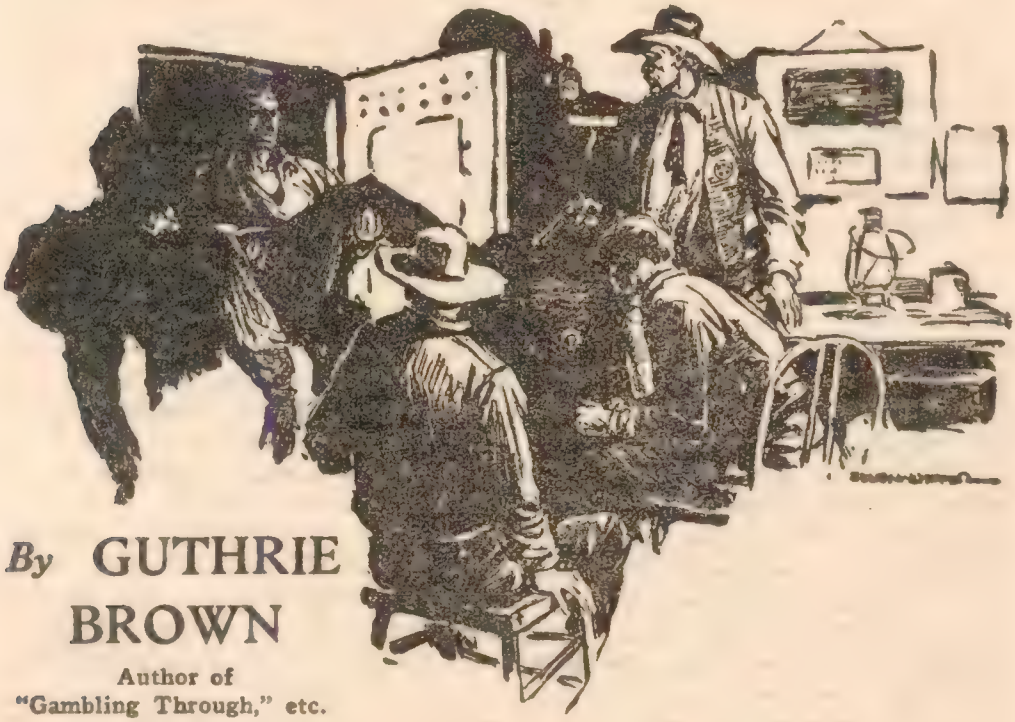
In the winter, their long tails drag through the snow, the hair becomes matted and woven into an awkward clublike mass, hence the name given them of "broom-tails" and "fuzzies." Those that range far back in the higher mountains are sometimes called "snow-birds" or "timberline-busters."

The night before an attempt is to be made to corral a band of these horses, several cowboys will camp in some gulch, far enough away so that the wild horses will not scent them. Long before daylight, the riders will have taken up their positions to windward of the spot where the wild bunch has been located by a scouting cowboy, and just at sunup they will show themselves at strategic points.

At first the wild horses will merely canter to some favored spot. Here they are sure to be greeted by another rider. Not as yet fully alarmed, they may slow down and slip through a forest to come out into another gulch. As one attempt to escape after another fails, they finally become panicky and stampede up and down the mountainside, across narrow, dangerous passes, through patches of fallen timber, even jumping over small cliffs, inexorably followed by the hard-riding cowboys, who are now adding to the terror of the horses by yelling and firing guns, sometimes at close quarters, shooting into the ground just in front of the leaders.

The chase now becomes a series of mad dashes with the cowboys covering every avenue of escape and crowding the herd closer, until they break into a wild, headlong flight, that leads them within the wide spread of the drift-fences and the open gate of the home corral. G. C. F.

LEFTY IS RIGHT



By GUTHRIE BROWN

Author of "Gambling Through," etc.

"LEFTY" PEARL, like every other freighter in the Kywalt Basin, knew what had been going on at the Flintridge Mine. It was common talk in the country. The Flintridge was owned by a Chicago company; and the common attitude was that any skullduggery which could be put over on "them Eastern capitalists" was not only good business but morally justifiable. Sullivan, superintendent of the Flintridge, was more admired than condemned for the skill with which he had put it over.

Lefty's views of the matter didn't correspond with the common ones, but it was none of his business. He had about all the grief he could assimilate in keeping some sixty freight outfits on the move over the eighty-mile haul from the Buckram Mine to the railroad at La Junta. If anybody had told him that he was about to become intimately involved in the affairs of the Flintridge, he would have tersely classified the informer as "batty."

The freight contractor had pulled into the little canyon town of Pelley Bend late that September night. Pelley Bend was his halfway stop between the mine and the railroad. He was tired, and he made as straight for bed as the care of six horses and a garrulous livery-stable owner would permit. It had been a hard day, an ordinary day, like a thousand others Lefty had known —a dawn start and hour after monotonous hour on the high, rocking seat of a freight wagon, with doubling up the pitches and riding

the brake lever down the grades—all to the ceaseless rattle of blocks and creak of bolsters and jingle of trace chains, that symphony of sounds that had entered into Lefty's very blood. For all his weariness, there was serenity in the lean, weather-bitten face of the freighter, a contented light in the level gray eyes. Hard life though it was, he loved it, and would have exchanged it for no other.

He sat on the edge of his bed in the boarding house, unlacing his boots, and wondering why in Tophet the price of grain on the Chicago Exchange should boost the cost of oats in Pelley Bend. He dangled a boot in one hand and remembered the single time he had seen Chicago. That was in his cow-punching days. He and some other wild young sprouts had taken a trainload of cattle to Chicago. What a bedlam the place was! Just a lot of racket and bad air, with not enough elbow room for——

There was a knock at his door. He called a surprised "Come in!" as he kicked off the other boot.

A young man in the rough garb of a freighter paused uncertainly in the doorway.

"Hello, Fred! Take a seat," Lefty invited.

Fred Parsons sat down and turned his hat nervously between his hands. His manner was hesitating and embarrassed. Lefty watched him a moment and asked:

"What's on your mind, son?"

"Well, Lefty"—the attractive face of the young man was troubled—"maybe this is just a piece of brazen cheek, but I didn't know who else to go to. I've been on the road with you and camped with you, and you've pulled me out of mudholes, and—— Well, this whole darn country seems to hunt you up when they're in trouble, so——" He made an impatient gesture. "The sum of it is that I've tackled something that begins to look too big for me, and I need advice."

Lefty took a chair, put his feet into another and relaxed. "Go ahead. I maybe can't help you, but it sometimes clears a thing up just to spill it."

The young man hesitated, then began abruptly: "In the first place my name isn't Fred Parsons. It's Gale Madison."

Lefty, watching him, made no comment.

"I don't suppose that the name Madison means anything to you."

Lefty thought a moment. "I don't believe it does."

"I'm the owner of the Flintridge Mine," the other stated slowly.

Lefty Pearl was a good listener. He often listened with so complete an attention that a man would come away wondering, "Now, why the deuce did I tell him all that?" One or two points became clear to him with Gale Madison's statement, but he did not speak.

"Of course," Gale went on, "you know what the situation is up there."

"Sullivan, you mean?"

"Yes."

Lefty produced tobacco and papers and thoughtfully rolled a smoke before he said: "I always thought the Flintridge was owned by a stock company."

"It was," Gale replied, "before my dad bought up all the stock."

LEFTY looked at him. The boy's tone had deepened. In his face was both pride and sorrow, and some sharper anxiety.

"S'pose we start at the beginnin', son."

"I guess that's the best way,"

Gale responded. "I'll try to make it short. Seven or eight years ago Sullivan became superintendent of the Flintridge. You probably remember. After he took charge the mine fell off in production until the company decided to close it down and wait for higher silver prices. Sullivan said that the ore was spotty, that it lay in scattered pockets, but that he'd be willing to take a gamble on it if they'd give him a three-year lease. So they leased to him, taking a mighty small royalty but figuring that a half loaf was better than none. Soon after that the mine began producing big. So the company took it back at the end of the three years, keeping Sullivan on as superintendent. Of course, you know some of this—how production dropped again, with Sullivan claiming he'd run out of pockets, and couldn't understand it, and so on.

"Well, the stockholders blamed dad, when their dividends fell off. He was head of the board of directors, and he'd got most of them to come in. So he bought them out, the whole kit of them—and broke himself doing it. He was that kind of man."

"Was?" Lefty asked softly.

Gale nodded, his face somber. "Worry and overwork—and grief. You see, he had a partner. Feral and he had been friends for years. There was a boom on the Chicago Stock Exchange, and Feral gambled with Flintridge stock. He just seemed to go off center all at once with the idea of easy money. Blew his brains out when he finally came to his senses and realized what he'd done. That happened just before the bottom dropped out of the mine, and between the two——" Gale could not go on.

"Well"—he straightened with a sigh—"history seems to be repeating itself. But I'm like my dad; I can't make myself believe it. That's what brought me to you, Lefty. If Sullivan can buy off a fellow like Breck Feral, he's maybe more than I can handle alone."

"Breck Feral?" Lefty repeated. "Where've I heard that name?"

"He was the checker at the Flintridge."

"I remember now. Don't believe I ever heard his last name. Is he related to your dad's pard?"

"His son—and my best friend. Until last Sunday." There was misery in the boy's face.

"What happened?" Lefty asked.

"I wish I knew for sure, Lefty."

The freighter smiled. "Well—I'm no mind reader, you know."

Gale shook off his preoccupation. "You see, Breck and I were in college when things—broke. He was awfully cut up over his dad. Then, when mine died, he said that he was going to come out here and investigate. He was the one who first suspected something crooked. He said it looked blamed funny to him—the mine booming when it was under lease, and then hardly paying expenses when Sullivan was on salary.

"And Breck didn't have a cent in the Flintridge, Lefty. The property is all in my name, and hardly paying taxes. It was just that he wanted to try and square what his dad had done, and help me, he said. He came out here and got the job as checker. And he learned plenty, I can tell you. I came as soon as I could and got a job hauling for the Flintridge. I tried to get in the mine, but Sullivan has been darn particular about who he hires to work inside, lately. I can't figure that."

"Mightn't it be," asked Lefty, "that he's heard the owner of the Flintridge has disappeared, and he's

afraid Gale Madison may turn up here?"

"I hadn't thought of that!"

"Let's get back to this friend o' yours. What happened?"

"He's quit the country, Lefty. Just picked up and left without a word to me. There's only one explanation for it. Sullivan found out some way that Breck was onto him, and he bought him off——"

"Was it Sullivan told you he'd left?"

"Not me, but some of the other boys. You see, Breck and I have been careful that nobody should guess there was anything between us."

"Well," asked Lefty, "what is it that's worryin' you, outside o' Breck quittin' on you?"

Gale answered: "Here's the lay. Sullivan's contract as superintendent has ten days to run. He's trying for another lease—the bookkeeper at home sends me the letters. And, Lefty, he intends to get that lease or know why, because he's blocked off a lot of rich pockets in the mine, pockets that he intends to open up as soon as the lease is cinched, just the way he did it before. He's set for a killing this time, a fortune that will put him where he'll never have to work again. I believe that he'll stop at nothing to get his hands on it."

"What's to hinder you puttin' in another super when his time is up?"

"Nothing," returned Gale. "That's what I will do. But that's not all I intend to do, Lefty." Gale rose and strode about the room, hands rammed in his pockets. "I'm going to make Sullivan pay for what he's done. He's a thief, and he killed my dad by holding out what belonged to the company. Dad broke himself to save other people. He'd be alive today if Sullivan had played straight. Somehow, I'm going to make that scoundrel pay."

"Don't see how, son. O' course, everybody knows what's been goin' on at the Flintridge; but, far's I can see, there ain't any way to punish that sort o' thievery. The silver he stole has been mined and sold, and you can't produce evidence that'd stand in any court. All you can do is kick him out, and then step in and open up them pockets he's been savin' for himself."

"But——"

"Look at it reasonable, kid. Revenge ain't gonna bring your dad back, even if you could figure a way to get even, which I don't see how you can."

GALE was staring gloomily at the floor between his feet. "I wish I'd never heard of the Flintridge Mine! It's never spelled anything but misery and grief—and crookedness."

Lefty asked gently: "It's your friend goin' back on you that's got you down, ain't it?"

Gale nodded unhappily. "I'd have gambled my life on him, Lefty—no matter what his dad had been. I've seen him in some tough spots, too, and he always came up to scratch." The boy shook his shoulders as if throwing off a load. "Then you think all I can do is just fire Sullivan when his time is up?"

"Um-m-m—— You might give him a little notice."

Gale replied acidly: "You might give an honest man some notice. I can't see that I'm under any obligation to give him any."

"That wasn't what I was gettin' at," Lefty told him. "There's just a chance that he'll show his cards, if he thinks he's got a few days to turn, maybe do something that'll give you the whip hand. If you wait

till his contract is up, all he can do is bow out."

Gale's eyes gleamed. "If I thought there was a chance to get a crack at him, I'd do anything!"

"It's a long shot," was Lefty's opinion, "but worth a try."

"Would you—Lefty, I know it's asking a good deal—but would you go with me?"

Lefty drawled: "You ain't got a Chinaman's chance o' keepin' me outa this now, kid."

The freighter found a driver to take his load of ore out to the railroad and went up to the Flintridge the next day on Gale's wagon. They made a long nooning so that they would pull into the mine well after dark and give Sullivan no warning of Lefty's presence. After Gale's teams were taken care of, the two sought the house of the superintendent. It was set against the hill somewhat above the rest of the camp and served both as office and residence.

At their entrance, Sullivan gave Lefty an astonished look and rose to hold out his hand. He was a big spare man, with high cheek bones and rather close-set eyes. Lefty knew that he was an efficient engineer and mine manager. His contacts with the man had been rare.

Sullivan exclaimed: "This is a surprise, Pearl! What brings you up to the Flintridge?"

Lefty responded easily as he shook hands. "Oh, there was a guy here I wanted to see, so I come up with Parsons on his wagon."

The freighter sat down, shoved a warped Stetson to the back of his head and got out the makin's as he went on in a conversational tone:

"Life is sure full o' surprises, ain't it?"

"Meaning what?" asked the superintendent, settling back in his chair.

"Well, Parsons here, for instance." Lefty waved a hand. "You'd never 'a' guessed, to look at him, that he was a mine owner, would you?"

"What?" Sullivan's jaw dropped, then he looked at Gale and demanded sharply: "What's the joke?"

Gale's glance was level. He tried to keep feeling out of his tone, as Lefty had advised, but it was difficult. He had at last come to the show-down with this man.

"Sullivan," he said, "I'm Gale Madison, owner of the Flintridge."

There was a moment's absolute silence in the room, while Sullivan stared at the young man as if not believing his ears. Then, to the amazement of Lefty and Gale, the superintendent threw back his head and roared with laughter. After a time he quieted, looked at Gale again and went off into another spasm. At last he turned to Lefty and managed between gulps:

"And you believed him! You let him take you in! The great Lefty Pearl sold like a lamb! Why, Pearl, that fellow isn't Gale Madison. I know he isn't!"

There was no doubting the sincerity of the man's tone. He shouted with laughter again as he saw the completely blank expression on Lefty's face.

Gale had come to his feet, color high, eyes blazing. His shout overtopped Sullivan's.

"I am Gale Madison, and you'll find it out! You're some actor, all right, but you're going to learn fast enough that I'm the owner of this mine——"

"Wait a minute!" Lefty stopped the boy. "Sullivan ain't actin'. That's plain as the nose on your face."

Gale turned toward him, too surprised for the moment to find words. The freighter went on, not looking at him.

"You say"—Lefty leaned toward the superintendent—"that you know he ain't Madison?"

"You bet I know it!" The words were completely sincere, and Lefty knew sincerity when he heard it. Sullivan's tone changed. "What does this whippersnapper think he's doing? What's the game?" He addressed himself directly to Gale. "I never did like your looks, from the day the wagon boss hired you. You're fired! Get out of this camp and stay out!"

GALE studied him with a grim little smile. "You're firing *me?* That's a laugh! Well, Mr. Superin——"

Lefty broke in with a drawl that compelled attention. "Well, I—am—damned!" His tone was reflective, his vacant gaze fastened on the wall. "Was I sold down the river, proper!"

Sullivan nodded vigorous agreement. "I'll say you were! And I'll confess, I'm surprised. From all I'd heard of you, I thought you were a man nobody could fool."

Lefty admitted, "I'm kinda surprised at myself." He turned a cold glance on Gale. "I guess we're through with you."

"But——" the dazed boy began.

"I said we were through!" Lefty Pearl hadn't employed that tone a half dozen times in his life. It, and the hard gray glance that went with it drove the young man from the room more effectively than a gun. He turned in the doorway, the bewilderment in his face mixed with a sort of ache, as if the last faith he'd had in the world was snatched away.

When the door had shut, Lefty drew a deep breath. "Whew!" he said. "I'm glad nobody but you knows what I let myself in for."

Sullivan laughed once more. "Oh, I'll keep it under my hat. But what do you suppose was his idea? And what made him think he could get away with it?"

Lefty shook his head. "I dunno. These cubs sometimes get the most harebrained notions. But how did you know he was an impostor, Sullivan?"

"Because I know the real Gale Madison!" The superintendent's tone was triumphant. It was evident that he was enjoying Lefty's discomfiture.

"Is that right?" Lefty was completely abashed. "Does he look like this boy, so that Parsons would think he stood a chance to fool you?"

"Not a bit. Madison is fair-haired, where Parsons is dark. And Madison isn't quite as big a man, either."

Lefty shook a perplexed head. "What the fellow thought he was gonna gain passes me—— But I never heard of the owner of the Flintridge bein' out here. He must 'a' come some time when I wasn't lookin'."

"He was never here," Sullivan answered. "I met him when I went east two years ago."

"I hear you're thinkin' of takin' a lease again," Lefty remarked.

The superintendent nodded. "The mine has fallen off so that Madison was glad to get even a small royalty out of it."

"Oh! So he's signed up already?"

"Yep. She's in the bag for another three years."

Lefty diverted the subject to other channels and presently left. He lost no time when he was outside. He located Gale in the mine clubhouse, sitting in a corner, his face drawn into unaccustomed lines of bitterness. He did not see Lefty until the freighter was standing over him. He looked up, and his glance became a glare.

Lefty lifted a chair over beside him, sat down, and said in a low voice, "Keep it outa your face, kid."

"Are you telling me what to do?" Gale retorted.

Lefty met his eyes. "Don't know me very well, do you, son? Not that I blame you for bein' upset by my change o' front. I had to make it good, so's Sullivan wouldn't guess it wasn't on the level."

"So that—— What're you driving at?"

"Boy"—Lefty's tone tightened—"there's something badly outa gear somewhere. Sullivan says he's got his lease, signed by Gale Madison."

"What——"

"Easy. Let's get outside."

The two stood in the road, a hundred yards from any building, and talked in low voices.

Lefty said: "I could see he was honest in sayin' he knew you wasn't Madison. Then who does he think is? He says Madison is light-haired and some smaller than you."

Gale's arm reached out to clutch Lefty's in the dark. "Breck! Good God, he can't mean Breck!"

"Does that describe him?"

"Yes! Breck sold out to Sullivan—and forged my name to a lease!"

"It kinda has that complexion," Lefty agreed.

"But I can't believe it! Lefty, I can't believe he'd do such a thing! It's not like anything he ever did in his life before."

"Well—wasn't that the way your dad felt about his dad?"

"Yes—but——"

Lefty put a hand on his shoulder. "There's nothin' much tougher than findin' out a friend has gone back on you. Kid, can you produce plenty of identification of yourself?"

"I certainly can. Besides, I've got the letters Sullivan has been writing to me to Chicago."

"This," said Lefty, "begins to look like a case for the sheriff. Let's get outa this camp to-night if we have to walk."

DURING the days they awaited the arrival of the sheriff, Lefty was not idle. He put Gale on one of his outfits and sent him out to the Buckram for a load of ore. He stayed in Pelley Bend and talked with miners and stage drivers and teamsters, his manner so casual that no one suspected a purpose behind his movements or his speech.

Sheriff Sanborn arrived in Pelley Bend late at night, the same night Gale returned from the Buckram. There was a brief consultation in Lefty's room, but he took neither man into his confidence. He wasn't sure that they were actors enough to carry the game through if they suspected its possibilities. He wasn't sure of those himself. He might be all wrong.

Sheriff Sanborn was a rangy, bleak-faced man with a reputation for ruthlessness that had a sobering effect on all evildoers within the range of his authority. He had underestimated Lefty at their first meeting. Now, as the three set out for the Flintridge on horseback in the early morning, the sheriff's cold eyes glowed a little as they rested on the lean, easy figure in the saddle beside him. Sanborn's habitual growl was pitched low so that Gale, ahead, would not hear him.

"What you got up your sleeve, Pearl?"

Lefty drawled in mock dismay: "And I thought I was some poker player!"

Sanborn retorted: "You forget that I've had considerable experience with men who tried to hide their thoughts."

Lefty grinned. "I'm not holdin' out on you, Sanborn. It's just that I got a guess about this business that may be a mile wide o' the mark. Don't be surprised at anything I do."

A rare gleam of friendliness appeared in the other's chilly eyes.

"Your guesses are pretty apt to be good. I'll back any game you wanta play."

"Thanks," Lefty said, surprised at the warmth of the answer. "Keep your eye on Gale. If it turns out I'm right, he may be hard to handle."

On arrival at the mine, the freighter left the other two for half an hour. He came back to announce:

"Sullivan is in the mine. He's supposed to come out about two o'clock. As soon as he goes up to his house we'll follow."

THE superintendent of the Flintridge Mine was frankly astonished when the three filed into his room. He looked from one to the other without speaking, his glance narrowing on Gale and Lefty, then coming to rest on Sanborn questioningly.

"Mind if we sit down?" asked the sheriff.

Sullivan waved them to chairs, his eyes looking a little closer together than usual as he asked with cool politeness:

"To what do I owe the pleasure of this call?"

The sheriff answered directly: "To the fact that this young man tells me he is the owner of the Flintridge."

The smile of the superintendent was slightly sour. "You're not the first person he's told that."

"He has proof that he is," Sanborn stated unemotionally.

"That's good," was the retort. "He'll need it."

"Madison," the sheriff ordered, "show your papers. Also the letters from Sullivan that you have in your possession."

Gale took a bulky envelope from his pocket. He opened it and spread a number of papers on the desk before Sullivan. Lefty was watching closely. He could not see that the superintendent turned a hair as he read them, then looked up and spoke to Sanborn.

"I don't know how this fellow got hold of these. They seem to be authentic, if he isn't."

The voice of the sheriff was always monotonous when he was about his business. It didn't vary from sentence to sentence by half a tone.

"You told Pearl that you know the real Gale Madison."

"That's right. I thought Pearl had got his eyes open, but evidently he's as gullible as ever." There was a slight sneer on Sullivan's mouth as his glance touched Lefty.

"You also stated," Sanborn went on, "that you have a lease to the Flintridge, signed by this man you believe to be Madison."

"Believe to be!" Sullivan snorted. "I know he's Madison!"

"And he gave you a three-year lease on the Flintridge?"

"Yes."

"To go into effect when?"

"When my contract as superintendent expires."

"When is that?"

"Next Friday."

"I should like to see the lease."

Was there a shade of hesitation in the superintendent's manner? He replied:

"Naturally I haven't the papers here. They're in my safe deposit box at the county seat." His manner changed. "And what is all this,

anyway—an inquisition? By what right are you demanding to know my business? Are you acting on the word of this impostor here?"

Sanborn answered imperturbably: "We're coming to that. Were the papers signed here at the mine, or were they sent to you?"

There was a second's pause before Sullivan replied: "They were sent to me. But what right have you to——"

I AM afraid, Sullivan, that I shall have to ask you to go to the county seat with me and produce them." The sheriff raised a hand, stopping the other's interruption. "There is a contest of authority here that can be settled nowhere but in court."

"Are you arresting me?"

"I hope there will be no necessity for that," was the answer. "If you are in the clear you should welcome a thorough sifting of the matter. We must determine whether or not the lease you hold is a forgery, in order to arrive at a conclusion regarding this young man's claim."

Lefty had been walking aimlessly about the room. He asked suddenly:

"Sullivan, where does this door lead?"

The eyes of the freighter were on the man as he spoke. He saw a ripple run through Sullivan's body as he turned his head to answer carelessly:

"Oh, that leads into a storeroom. I had an old tunnel walled off for extra supplies."

Lefty said softly: "So I've heard."

The superintendent's head swung back, his eyes all at once inscrutable. There was danger in every line of him—and Sanborn's gun was lying in the sheriff's broad palm as he said without inflection:

"Take it easy, mister."

Sullivan, fingers strained around his chair arms, looked from one to another, recovered his poise with an effort, and demanded:

"What in the devil are you——"

"Sheriff," Lefty interrupted, still in that deadly soft voice, "I suggest that we open this door."

Things happened then much faster than they can be told. With his left hand Sullivan snatched a heavy glass inkstand from his desk and hurled it at Sanborn's head. In the same instant his right hand darted to a drawer in front of him. He jerked it open and seized a revolver.

But as his arm came up, his wrist was seized from behind and the gun twisted from his grasp. He whirled to face Lefty and the muzzle of his own weapon. He stood still, glaring, breathing heavily, his thoughts darting about almost visibly behind his close-set eyes.

Sanborn's monotonous voice ordered: "Hold out your hands." The inkstand had caught the sheriff in the shoulder, temporarily paralyzing his gun arm. As Sullivan hesitated to obey, the officer ordered: "Shoot to kill, Lefty, if he makes a move."

He shackled the superintendent in his chair, and Lefty asked: "Where's the key to that door, Sullivan?"

A glare was the only answer.

Lefty reflected a moment. "I s'pose it's on you—and you're too slimy to touch." He looked at the gun he held and walked over to the door. He placed the muzzle against the lock and pulled the trigger. It took a second bullet to smash the lock completely.

As the door swung inward, Lefty turned a worried glance over his

shoulder at Gale. Sanborn moved nearer to the astonished, watching boy.

Slowly Lefty pushed the door farther open, peering into the windowless room. It could scarcely be called a room. The floor was of dirt, and the sides and roof were the timbered interior of a tunnel. Lefty's eyes, adjusting themselves to the dark, were anxiously searching the floor. He moved on into the gloom, treading gingerly. Suddenly he uttered a low cry and disappeared from sight.

Those left in the office were still, Sullivan sitting slumped in his chair, head on his chest, the other two rigid, watching the blank doorway.

Presently there was movement in the dark beyond it. Lefty emerged, carrying something. Gale began to shake uncontrollably, then he stumbled forward with a broken cry.

"Breck!"

Lefty laid a gaunt and ghastly figure down in the light. The face under a bristly beard was colorless except for dark bruises and an ugly gash across one cheek. The fair hair was matted with dirt and dried blood.

Gale had flung himself down on the floor beside the body, calling passionately to his friend. He even shook the emaciated frame in his distress. Then he suddenly flung up his head. He was on his feet with a bound, and whirled toward Sullivan.

"You murderer! You——"

He was caught in the sheriff's powerful arms as he leaped at the fettered man. He fought savagely for a minute, but he was no match for the other. Sanborn clamped him to helplessness, and Lefty's voice said quietly:

"Breck's not dead, son. Get the camp doctor here fast as you can."

The boy was gone like a shot as Sanborn released him.

IT was the next day before Breck Feral could talk and they were able to piece together all the parts of the story. Gale, face alight with happiness, sat by the bed, never taking his eyes from his friend's face. Even Sanborn's hard eyes softened as he watched the two.

Lefty asked: "That was three weeks ago Sunday, you say?"

Breck nodded. "Nobody was in the mine, and I wanted to locate the rich pocket I'd heard the miners talking about, one of the best, they said, that Sullivan had blocked off. I'd made a sort of rough map of them all, as soon as I was sure of their location. When I was coming out of the mine, I thought I heard somebody, but didn't see any one and hoped I hadn't been seen myself.

"It was the next day that Sullivan had the carpenter and a crew start connecting his house with the old tunnel behind it, for a 'storeroom,' he said."

Sanborn asked: "What made you suspicious, Lefty?"

"That he was so dead sure that he knew Madison, to begin with," was the answer. "Then I found out that he hadn't wanted a floor in his new storeroom and was pretty short with the carpenter when he argued for one."

"What," Gale wanted to know, "would a floor have to do with it?"

There was an awkward silence before Breck said grimly: "He would likely have wanted a floor—after he had buried a body in there."

Wordless, Gale reached out and grasped his friend's arm.

"Did he tell you that was what he would do with you?" was Sanborn's next question.

"No," Breck replied, "but I knew that was his plan, the only safe plan for him. He told me that if I'd sign the lease he'd give me plenty of money to get out of the country and stay out, and he'd send my royalties anywhere I said. I knew my only chance was to let him go on believing I was Gale Madison. He thought if he kept me on bread and water—and abuse—long enough, I'd sign. And I knew, of course, that the minute I did sign I was finished."

"But what," the sheriff wanted to know, "made him so sure that you were Madison?"

Lefty answered that. "He'd found out somehow that Breck came from Chicago. And he had learned that Gale Madison had disappeared. When he caught Breck lurkin' about the mine, he was dead sure that it was Madison. I knew he was lyin' when he said that he'd met Madison in the East. He went away two years ago, but it was to San Francisco, not Chicago."

Breck took up the story. "When he asked me to come to his house that night and I denied being Madison, he was convinced I was lying. Then I saw the trap I was in, after two days in that hole, and confessed I was Madison, but held out on the lease. My only chance was to wait for Gale to start something."

"And I thought——" Gale began remorsefully.

Breck stopped him. "Wouldn't I have thought the same thing, in your place? Going to Lefty the way you did was what saved me."

But Gale could not dismiss it so lightly. "I should have thought to do what he did—check up and find that there wasn't a man who knew anything about your going away, freighters or stage drivers or anybody. That was proof enough that Sullivan had lied about your leaving."

Lefty remarked: "I can't figure a man that'd take such a chance as he did."

"For a fortune?" Sanborn's laugh was brief. "From Breck's figures, there's half a million sealed up in those pockets that are blocked off. I've known men who'd commit not one murder but any number for that much money. And," he added, "Sullivan isn't as grateful as he oughta be. If Lefty hadn't been so prompt, the scoundrel would be going up for murder instead of assault and kidnaping."

Gale Madison had plenty of difficulty in persuading Breck Feral that he had earned a share in the Flintridge; but that was as nothing to the stone wall that the young man encountered in Lefty Pearl.

Lefty just laughed at him.

"Me take it easy? Why, kid, my work's my fun. I'd be a fish outa water without six lines in my mitt. Thanks just the same, but I got enough laid by so I won't go hungry when I get too old to ride a freight wagon any more."

In Next Week's Issue, "THE SHERIFF CALLS HIS DOGS,"

by RAY HUMPHREYS.

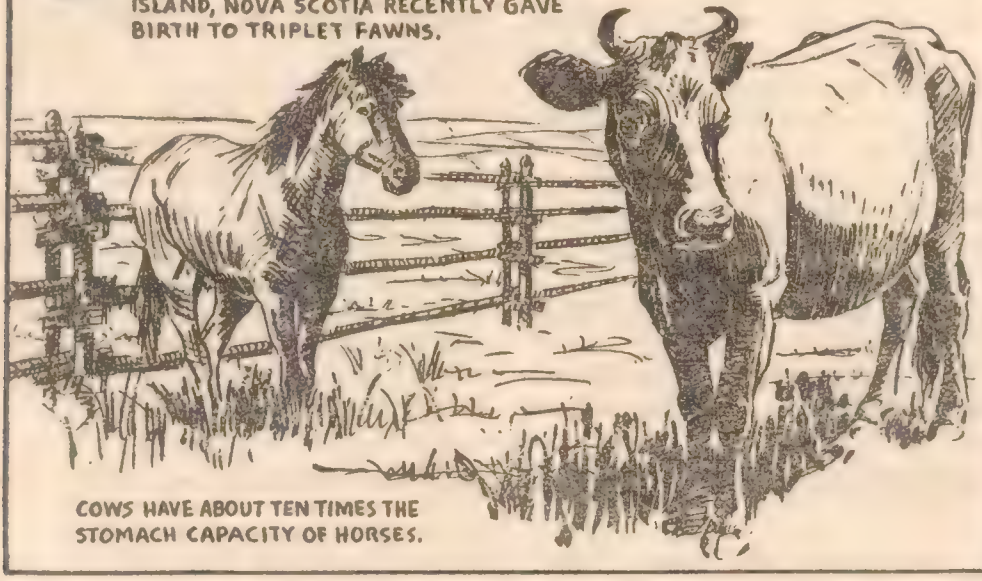
Interesting And True

By H. FREDRIC YOUNG

A WILD DOE DEER ON CAPE BRETON ISLAND, NOVA SCOTIA RECENTLY GAVE BIRTH TO TRIPLET FAWNS.

THE SAME BRAND MAY BE CALLED BY OTHER NAMES IN DIFFERENT PLACES.

THUS: # IS VARYINGLY CALLED PIG PEN, DOUBLE-CROSS, DOUBLE SLASH, CROSSED ELEVEN, ETC.



COWS HAVE ABOUT TEN TIMES THE STOMACH CAPACITY OF HORSES.

Mr. Young will pay one dollar for any usable Western "Interesting And True" features which readers may send him in care of Street & Smith's Western Story Magazine, 79 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y. Return postage must be included for suggestions found unsuitable.

SLIDE ROCK

By EUGENE R. DUTCHER

Author of "Outlaw Tribute," etc.

THE hotel lobby in Langstown was not so warm that those beads of perspiration should stand out on Roge Coe's forehead. Unconsciously he kept dipping the pen and making little dots on the desk blotter while his eyes followed young John Bronson's pacing figure.

Bronson's sister, Lillian, watched both men. She crouched on a chair edge, hands gripping hard the arms. All three were trying not to hear that ominous murmur out in the sunny street. John Bronson's road gang was rapidly getting out of hand. They had just buried the fifth man who had been crushed in rock slides on the Snake River Canyon job. Now, red-faced plow and fresno workers waved half-empty whisky flasks demanding that Coe and Bronson, whom they all felt were responsible for the deaths, come out.

Roge Coe sent the pen quivering into the blotter. "I guess, John," he said, near casually, "we had better go out before they come in. They are getting drunker every minute, and Chico Lang will see they don't run out of free booze."

John Bronson thrust fists deep

into the pockets of his whipcord coat. He looked exactly what he was, a young engineer fresh out of school.

"There is nothing I can tell them now, that I haven't already said." A gray hopelessness gripped his youthful face. "I tell you Roge, Chico Lang is starting those slides, but I can't prove it! If I complete the new road through the mountains it means this rotten town of his will be isolated. No one will travel the old desert road. If the men quit—and they're going to—I'm licked." Again Bronson started nervously pacing the room. "When the winter rains set in it is impossible to work in Snake Canyon. I can't hire another crew in time, and you know my contract says the road must be completed in another four months."

Perhaps Coe alone realized the full extent of their danger. He looked through the big front window to the far side of the street, where "Chico" Lang leaned against a saloon front, thumbs hooked in the pockets of his white vest. Flanking him on either side was Rego and Charley, a nasty pair of gunmen.

Lang's sharp, fox-featured face showed pleasure as he watched Saxson, another of his killers, goading the drunken workmen into the kind of frenzy that makes mobs do horrible things. Coe realized that Chico Lang meant to take no chance of Bronson hiring another crew if he could help it.

Lillian slipped from the chair. Her hands gripped Coe's big arms. "We—we've ruined you," she whispered. "I'd never have let you loan John the money if I'd thought there was the least chance of failure. Oh Roge, if you lose your ranch because of me you——"

Gently Coe's rope-calloused finger lifted her chin. "I went into this because it looked like a chance to make some money," he said, and Lillian knew it was a lie.

Both young folks were thinking of his splendid ranch five hundred miles distant. Often they had ridden across its grassy acres dreaming of the time when John Bronson's schooling would be over and Lillian could quit her café job and come to Coe.

"As soon as John gets a foothold in the engineering field——" All their young plans had hinged on that.

It had been a happy day when John Bronson came with the news of his great opportunity in far-off Snake Canyon. He could get the road contract, but it would take money. Even as Coe signed the mortgage papers he had known he followed his heart, not business judgment.

Now the six-foot frame of him was very straight. He wished Bronson had sent him word sooner of this trouble with Lang, but the kid was proud. He wanted to stand on his own feet.

Gently Coe lifted Lillian aside. "I'm going out now, John," he said quietly. "You coming?"

John Bronson shook off his nerves. The quiver went out of his shoulders. "Coming, Roge," was his answer.

Side by side they stepped through the hotel doorway and were greeted by a howl. Coe did not stop, but he wished mightily that Bronson knew how to handle a gun. It was the mob that faltered.

Only a week this tanned young cattleman had been among them, yet already they felt he, and not Bronson, was their boss. The very look in his eyes seemed to drive them back. Not even Chico Lang's bad

liquor could make them forget those low-hung guns.

Coe singled out the red-whiskered, red-faced foreman and stopped with his boots nearly touching the scuffed-toed shoes of "Brick" Sills.

"Brick," Coe said, "didn't Bronson tell you to get your men back to camp right after the funeral?"

"That he did," Brick Sills humped his mountainous shoulders, "but the slide rock has killed its last man what takes orders from me."

"That's telling the dirty murderers," Saxson, Lang's gunman hooted from back in the crowd. "I got a rope here what needs stretching."

A GROWL rose. The ring of flushed faces swayed close as those in front were forced forward by their comrades. Coe could feel Bronson's back pressing his own. Big hairy paws, calloused from the grip of plow handles and fresnos, reached hungrily over shoulders.

Coe's hands weren't quite touching gun butts, yet those in the front ranks hesitated. Fists were the weapons of their trade, not guns.

Lillian stood in the hotel doorway, lips parted in a silent, agonized protest, while across the street Chico Lang still lounged against the saloon front, casually picking his teeth. His dark eyes seemed interested only in a speck of dirt on one highly polished boot, but he listened while Saxson fired the drunken road gang toward a lynching.

Coe heard that squalling voice, too. He saw Saxson's face, an ugly, flat face, over Brick Sills's great shoulder, and as the gunman forced his way forward, waving his rope, Coe's right left his hip. Like lancing gun flame it licked out and back. That sickening pop of knuckles on jawbone was followed by Coe's quiet voice.

"I'm willing to talk this thing out with you boys," he was speaking even before Saxson crumpled. Coe held the suddenly silent crowd with his eyes, "but I'll not have one of Lang's hired killers butting in. Let's act like human beings for five minutes. Bronson has told you those landslides aren't starting of their own accord. Why don't you believe him?"

"I'll tell you why," shouted a powder man far out in the crowd. "We figure that's just an excuse to cover up his own faults. If Bronson sent bigger crews up the sides to knock down the loose stuff before the gangs went to work, there wouldn't be no slides come down on us. But he don't do that. No, he's too darned greedy to drive that road through, 'cause the faster it's done the more money you and him make. When a slide catches some poor devil he just buries him and blames it on Chico Lang. It's a good excuse, but we've had enough of it."

Young Bronson's voice was a little shrill with anger as he cried: "That's a lie! Those slides always start above where the crews have cleaned and they would not start without human help. I tell you Lang is murdering your friends!"

Coe saw Chico Lang flip away the toothpick and hunch his shoulders into the long, black coat. The gambler came swinging forward. His dark, high-cheek-boned face was expressionless as he shoved men from his path.

"If you call me a murderer," he said, "you'd better have proof."

Coe eased around, taking the play away from Bronson. His eyes met Lang's green ones. "When I have proof," he answered, "you had better reach for your gun."

It was Brick Sills who broke in with: "I don't guess there's no need

of all this blowing. The men and me don't care a heap whether them slides come down of their own accord or are started. They do come down. And the shale is getting worse every foot we push the road. I ain't going to have one more laddie's death on my conscience. You hear? I ain't sending them into that death trap while you and Bronson stay back safe from grinding rock."

Sills pulled the cork from a whisky flask. His homely face was full of emotions. He had been very near yesterday morning when the shale had come roaring down to crush its fifth victim.

Coe reached out and took the bottle from him. "I'll make you a sporting proposition, Sills," he said. "You think Bronson and I have been dodging the danger. You're wrong and we'll prove it, by meeting you and your gang on the job to-morrow morning. Those five who have died were murdered whether you believe it or not, and if you quit now the man who did it will never be caught." And Coe was looking full into Chico Lang's narrow face.

Sills hesitated, then turned on his gang. "How about it boys?" he asked. "It's up to you. Do we go back to work?"

Perhaps it was Lang's own liquor that gave false courage now.

"I'm willing," some one agreed. "If Coe and Bronson are up there with us I reckon they'll see there ain't no danger. And if them slides ain't been their fault, I'm wanting to help catch the rat what's been burying us."

Coe motioned Sills away. "Better get them started toward camp, Brick," he suggested. "They're a pretty shaky lot." He watched the foreman herd his charges toward the freight wagons that had brought them into Langstown for the funeral.

Coe, Bronson and Lang did not move. The gambler's lips smiled, but his eyes grew slanted as they narrowed. "You hit very hard," he purred, motioning toward Saxson sprawled at their feet, "but that fool will come too soon. Perhaps the next time he'll have better luck."

Coe nodded. He knew Lang, in his veiled way, was admitting that he, like his gunman, had been defeated this time, but that there would be another time coming.

BROTHER and sister sat quietly beside Coe as he sent the team out of town, and behind them Chico Lang ordered his killers to their saddles. By riding through the rough mountains they could beat Coe and the rest to the construction camp—be waiting for them when they arrived about dark.

And sundown found Coe turning the buckboard from the old desert road onto the new one that cut directly through the mountain. They had left the slower freight wagons behind. Lillian felt very small between the big shoulders of Coe and her brother. They had talked little in the three-hour ride from town, but now with the steep mountain sides laying over them as a grim reminder of the danger, Lillian tugged at Coe's sleeve.

"I wish you had let the men quit," she whispered. "It's so hopeless. We can't win."

"As long as the crew stays on the job we've a chance," was Coe's answer. "We can double the guards up on the mountainside and Lang won't be able to get near enough to start a slide." All three knew he was lying. There were so many little canyons of concealment, so easy to start the shale moving.

Lillian shivered violently as they passed a jumble of rock. There the first man had been crushed. Tomorrow the men would be working in the canyon's bottom and she had heard Brick Sills say they were cutting into the worst slide area now.

A cold wind swept down Snake Canyon. Lillian huddled lower. Bronson threw his mackinaw about her shoulders and let his arm rest there. Coe looked straight ahead at the raw cut and fell off the road.

At last the tents loomed up white in the night. Many fresnos and plow blades gleamed dully in the starlight. Only last week the portable camp had been moved forward to this spot following the work deeper into Snake Canyon. A little plateau a hundred feet above the workmen's tents afforded space for Bronson's office, and some privacy for Lillian.

Coe pulled the team to a stop beside a stack of baled hay. "I'll unharness," he offered, "you and Lillian go on up to the tents, John."

But when Coe had turned the team in with the other stock and hung the harness in the lean-to shed, he found Lillian still standing by the buckboard. Both watched Bronson's dim form moving up the trail to the plateau.

Other eyes—grim, eyes, saw him too. Chico Lang, crouched behind the canvas walls of the blacksmith shop, showed his teeth in a satisfied smile. He nudged Rego and Charley and the three melted back to reach the plateau by a roundabout way. Saxson, nursing a badly bruised chin already waited up there, and he had his orders.

As they watched Bronson disappear, Lillian slipped under Coe's arm.

"John feels he's a failure," she said throatily. "But it's not his fault. He is a good engineer; I'm really to blame. I shouldn't have urged him to take the contract until you had an opportunity to look the ground over. You seem so much older than John. You would have realized Lang would do anything to save his rotten town."

The freight wagons were rolling in now and Coe led Lillian away. They stopped halfway up the trail to watch lights come on in tents. Grotesque shadows reeled about as men, sodden with liquor, flopped down on cots. Brick Sills's bull voice drifted to them as he ordered the stock cared for and was answered by muttered oaths.

Coe's arm was about Lillian's waist as they trudged on.

"There won't be a steady nerve in the lot come dawn," he said. "Both John and I will have our hands full keeping them on the job."

They reached the plateau and walked toward the tent that served Coe and Bronson as office and living quarters. Light showed through the canvas side but there was no shadow to tell of Bronson's presence.

"I want to tell John good night," Lillian said and Coe pulled back the flap for her to enter.

For a stunned moment both stood staring at ugly red stains drying into the hard earthen floor.

"Lang!" it was near a sob from Lillian's lips. "He—he's killed John."

Coe stooped for a crumpled piece of paper at his feet. Lillian pressed against him as both read the short message:

They are taking me to Langstown. Hurry.

"John didn't write that," Lillian breathed. "He never crosses his t's.

It's a trap to draw you away, so Lang can get you, too."

Coe turned grimly, with Lillian clinging to him. "Where are you going, Coe?" she asked, knowing his answer.

"To Langstown," he said so quietly. "John's got to be back here by dawn, or the crew will quit."

Still gripping his arm Lillian was dragged out into the night. "But that is just what Lang wants you to do," she protested. "That's why he left the note. He and his killers will be waiting for you."

Whatever Coe might have answered was forestalled by the appearance of Brick Sills.

"I've got the gang to bed," the foreman grunted, none too steady himself. "Thought I'd better see Bronson about what work he wanted us to start in the morning."

Coe's big bulk blocked the tent's entrance. "Bronson has turned in," he answered. "Better get some sleep yourself Brick, John can give you his orders in the morning."

Sills hesitated. "The men are betting two to one that Bronson ain't got the nerve to lead 'em into that slide area," he grunted at last. "Me, I ain't betting, but I'm holding my gang back till Bronson shows up. And if he don't—well, we're quitting cold."

COE watched Sills stalk off, then he looked down into Lillian's frightened eyes. "John and I will be back before dawn," he said.

It was a desperate hope more than a promise. Both realized keenly that not only their happiness but John Bronson's life depended upon Coe's success.

"I'll be waiting for you both," Lillian whispered, trying to match her man's calmness. "Be so careful, dear."

Coe left her standing there, and as he glided from sight, Lillian's head tilted back, her arms were lifted as she breathed a prayer. Surely He who guided those bright stars could guide her loved ones back safely.

Quickly Coe caught up his mount in the corral and with Sills moving from tent to tent, blowing out lamps where men slept in a half stupor, he threw on his saddle.

Coe rode quietly from the camp. He was not a praying man, but there were times when a fellow felt himself inadequate to the job—this was one of those times, and Coe paused for a moment, watching those same stars Lillian was watching on the plateau above him. Then he rode on into a rocky ravine that would take him straight through the mountains toward Langstown.

The rough miles seemed terribly long and the hours fled so swiftly. Desperation rode with Coe through the forest. It still gripped him coldly as his mount left the mountains. Far ahead in the desert Langstown's lights blinked like yellow stars, and in one of those squalid buildings John Bronson would be held captive.

Midnight found Coe leaving his mount in a ravine and slipping forward through the greasewood. He crouched down in the last bit of shelter. A hundred feet of open ground separated him from the backs of buildings. Here and there lights gleamed from rear windows. Coe could see a cook in an all-night café working in the greasy kitchen. Music drifted up from saloons. He slipped along, paralleling the store backs. The evening stage must have just come in, for lights came on in

the hotel as weary travelers took rooms for the night.

Running low in the sage, Coe was nearing the end of town when he saw Bronson. The young engineer was held in a one-room adobe hut. It might have appeared an accident that the curtain supposed to cover the window was caught so Coe could see Bronson gagged and bound in a chair. There seemed to be no guards and a faint crack of light told that the rear door was ajar, inviting rescue. Coe held his cover. Gun out, he waited while precious minutes fled.

Dark, flat-roofed adobes hugged either side of Bronson's prison. For an instant a figure was silhouetted against the stars, then vanished below the two-foot parapet. On top of the other building, a spark appeared for a moment as an incautious gunman, hungry for a smoke, lighted up.

A guard was hidden within the hut, too. Coe saw his shadow loom large against the mud wall as the fellow changed position.

Perhaps they would not be watching the front so closely. Coe cautiously moved on, circling wide around the end of town to come up behind buildings on the opposite side of the street. For twenty minutes he laid against the earth watching the tops of buildings, but there was no sign of life here. Like a shadow against the ground he glided forward and eased in between two adobe walls. Across the fifty-foot street he could see Bronson's prison, curtains covering the front windows, but again after moments of waiting, Coe saw movement on top the buildings on either side. He became aware of murmuring voices through the thick wall on his right. A window covered by a curtain that did not quite reach the bottom afforded Coe view. He saw Lang standing in the center of the floor, staring down at his watch.

"It's going on two," he snapped. "If Coe's coming he should have been here an hour ago."

Saxson sat in a chair, tenderly holding his bruised jaw.

"Maybe the devil ain't going to fall for your trap," he grunted painfully. Lang slid the watch into his vest pocket and started pacing the room, while Rego and Charley watched their boss from a corner, like hungry killer hounds.

"Coe'll show up all right," Lang assured, "but there is a chance that girl, Lillian, might try to lead the gang herself. She's a spunky little devil. She might shame the men into following her. I'll take Charley and Rego and head for the camp. If the crew goes to work we'll start a slide that'll change their minds—for good."

Coe felt the perspiration start out all over him. It would be like Lillian to try something desperate. He could not take chances with her safety. He must beat Lang to the construction camp—but Coe did not move, for within, Chico Lang had whirled on Saxson.

"Whether Coe shows up or not," he snapped, "you'll have to take Bronson out of town before daylight and get rid of him. We can't turn him loose to talk."

Saxson just hooked thumbs in his white and black cowhide vest and grinned. That was the sort of job he enjoyed. In the narrow alley, Coe went slowly to a knee. If he left, it meant condemning Bronson to sure death. If he remained behind he would be gambling with Lillian's life. Sills and the rest might

not follow Lillian into the slide area, but there was no doubt of Bronson's fate were he left in Saxson's hands; and Coe knew he must stay. Lillian would want it that way. Cold perspiration gathered in the deep lines of Coe's face. Within, they were preparing to leave.

Charley and Rego followed Lang through the door. Coe, flat against the side wall heard saddle leather squeak, then hoofs pounded away. He watched Saxson slump into a chair. Coe seemed fascinated by the fellow's black and white cowhide vest as he deliberately rapped sharply on the pane. The sound brought Saxson erect, hands on guns, crouched.

"Who's there?" he barked. "What you want?"

Coe's hand covered his mouth, muffling the words. "I've got news from the construction camp," he called. "Open up the window, quick. Coe's on his way here!"

ALREADY Saxson leaped forward. He threw the window up. "Where is that devil Coe at?" Saxson asked eagerly. "Hey, you, come up here where I can see you."

Coe came. His whole body followed the right fist out of the darkness. Like a bundle of rage the gunman fell, and Coe went through the window. A minute later Saxson lay bound and gagged with his own belt and bandanna, and Coe was slipping into the killer's distinctive white and black vest. With his Stetson drawn low he threw open the front door and stepped into the street.

Coe tried to simulate Saxson's pigeon-toed walk as he strode straight toward Bronson's prison. There was little light here on the edge of town. A head popped up on one of the flat roofs, a rifle gleamed.

"What's up, Saxson?" the fellow grunted, recognizing the white and black vest.

Coe said nothing, he just pointed toward the middle adobe where Bronson was held. There, a curtain was pulled back a little as the guard peered out. The curtain fell and Coe stopped before the door. He heard the bolt grind back. A moment more and revealing light would shaft over him! No longer would the vest conceal his identity and if the guard gave the alarm to those on the roof tops—Coe's chest pressed the door as it opened inward. His gun-filled right hand struck forward around the door edge. The barrel lashed down as Coe followed the still opening panel in. The blow landed squarely atop the gunman's bald head and he flopped soundlessly forward into Coe's arms. Gently the door closed and Coe worked feverishly. Every second was giving Lang and his men a lead that would be hard to overcome. Soon the bad man sat bound and gagged in the chair Bronson had recently occupied and the young engineer, still stunned by the suddenness of it all, stood flexing cramped muscles. Coe was fastening the balded one's gun belt about Bronson's hips. He picked the guard's tall-crowned Stetson from the table and thrust it onto his friend's head.

"No time to talk now," Coe had Bronson by the arm, forcing him toward the door. "Lang's already on his way to the camp. We've got to beat him there. Just follow my lead. Come on."

They stepped onto the board walk. Two horses stood across the street and Coe moved toward them, Bronson at his side. Midway, one of the roof guards called:

"Hey, Saxson, where are you and Baldy going? What's coming off?"

Coe waved, but made no answer until they were both in saddles. Then with the horses' hoofs deadening his words, he called:

"Stick on the job, fellas. Them is Lang's orders." Coe tried to imitate Saxson's nasal voice.

Knee to knee they swept down the street and out of town toward the mountains. Both their young faces were gray in the starlight.

"Thanks," Bronson said simply. He was none too steady in the saddle as the head wound he had received earlier started throbbing. "Lang sure gave me a belt."

Coe nodded. "We'll have to kill our mounts if we reach the camp before dawn," was his answer. "If something should happen and the gang goes to work without us, Lang means to bury them in a slide."

Bronson jerked erect in the saddle. He recognized that note of near panic under Coe's steady voice. "You—you don't think Lillian would try anything like that?" he cried.

Coe just drove his horse hard ahead. An hour took them into the mountains. Another hour and Coe realized they were poorly mounted. The beasts were foundering badly. Slowly in the east, pine ridges became outlined against a gray background as the sun made its approach known. It came so swiftly!

"Easy, John," Coe warned, "your horse will drop dead if you keep that up."

Bronson's eyes were a bit wild. "Every second is putting Lang farther in the lead," he shouted. "The men will already be up, and if they are going to work, they'll start soon. Lillian would do anything to keep them on the job. You know that!"

Coe looked straight ahead, as they rushed across a meadow, up—always up, toward that far-away ridge that would give them a view of the construction camp deep in Snake Canyon. The sun touched that ridge, nearly giving life to the trees.

Only a hundred yards more. Then Coe was looking down on the camp far below, and for the first time in his life his eyes were full of fear. Smoke curled slowly from the cook shack, but there was no life; the men were gone. So were the shiny-bladed plows and fresnos that would have been left behind had the crew quit.

"They're working!" Coe's voice sounded hollow and empty, for Lillian's pinto saddle horse was not in the corral.

He leaped from the saddle and plunged on an angle down the steep slope toward a shoulder that would give them view of the road's end, hidden now by a bend in Snake Canyon. Bronson followed him awkwardly with the unaccustomed gun belt thumping against his thigh.

Each second Coe expected to hear the deadly rumble of sliding rock. Lang had had ample time to get into position. Slipping, stumbling in their haste they left the pine-studded slopes and entered the shale. Clawing his way over a ridge, Bronson bumped into Coe as he stopped abruptly.

FAR below them and a little ahead, men moved in the canyon bottom like ants. Teams dragging fresnos and plows, cut and filled the road while Brick Sills leaned against a rock, watching. And Lillian rode her pinto back and forth, giving her moral support.

Only for an instant did Coe's eyes remain on the scene before sweeping

fearfully up the loose jumble of rocks. Far above and out of view of those below he saw them. Lang, Rego and Charley, all three were working feverishly to loosen a huge boulder. Once it started its mad plunge it would gather shale until the whole mountainside moved.

Coe whirled as Bronson fumbled out his .45, intent on warning those below.

"They won't hear it with all the noise," Coe shouted. "You'll just be warning Lang that we're here. Come on!"

They dropped back over the ridge and in its concealment started upward. Coe found his thoughts striking out with the clearness of lightning flashes. Bronson was too poor with a .45 to be of any use in a gun fight, but he could be used for another purpose. They had reached a spot opposite Lang and his men when Coe whirled.

"Stay here, John," he snapped. "Count twenty, then lift up and start blasting at those devils."

Bronson reached for Coe's arm. "It's too far," he protested. "I can't hit them."

But Coe shook free. "Count twenty and start shooting," he answered and went scrambling on. He would not have a chance of stopping the slide if he chose a gun fight with Lang's men protected by rocks as they were, but he might call them at their own game.

Once he peered over the ravine's edge. The three were a little below him now, but he must get higher. Even as Coe looked, Rego and Charley under the urging of Lang, threw their weight on the stout pine limb they were using as a lever. The rock moved, slid a foot on its flat bottom —stopped. Small rock and gravel trickled away. Another effort would start the slide. Why didn't Bronson open up? Coe moved higher, ten, twenty, thirty feet more before a .45 boomed. With the explosion Coe left the ravine.

Leaping into the open he started for a spot directly above the three. Loose rock shifted and slid under his boots, threatening to hurl him down. Bronson was down there, standing erect, firing steadily, making up in courage what he lacked in accuracy. Rego and Charley had dropped the tree limb and were answering. Too late, Lang saw Coe's leaping form two hundred feet above. With lead pinging from rocks all about him, Coe dropped behind the shelter of an upended shale slab. Over on the ravine's edge Bronson had emptied his .45 and was feverishly reloading when Coe's voice rang out clearly.

"Start that slide," he warned, "and I'll start one up here that will bury you deep."

A moment of silence, then: "He's bluffing," Lang bellowed. "We tried to budge that same slab ourselves. He can't do it. Get on that lever, you fools, and start the slide. I'll fix this devil!" Lang came wallowing up the steep incline, keeping low behind projecting rocks.

Coe's chest was pressing against the cold slab and he knew Lang had spoken truly. It could not be loosened. But there was another fifty feet below him that a desperate man might topple over, and Coe moved to meet Chico Lang.

His first step into the open sent him plunging down, half buried in the loose rubble.

It was a strange gun duel of seconds' duration. Lang, in his long-tailed black coat and white vest, fighting his way upward, smashing lead at the tumbling, rolling form; Coe snapping shots as he caught his

balance for an instant, then fell on. Two, three times he fired. Swiftly the distance between them diminished. Four, five. Coe could see Rego and Charley now as they hurled their weight against the lever.

Lang had stopped, his white vest showed a spurting stain. He was pitching backward, rolling loose, as Coe came hard up against the rock he had been fighting toward. His arms fastened under it.

"Drop that pole," Coe's voice was deadly, as Lang's lifeless body rolled to a stop at the feet of Rego and Charley. He wondered if the bad men would realize he dared not loose the rock for fear of starting a movement that would rush down on the crew in the bottom of Snake Canyon? No, the pair were too badly shaken to think clearly.

"We've had enough," Rego shouted, edging away. "It was Lang's orders."

"That's right," Charley added, following his companion. "Just give us a chance to get out the country, fella, and you won't never see us no more."

Neither waited for his consent. Both bolted like frightened deer across the slide area and vanished in the far timber as Coe stood up to wave assurance at Bronson who had just completed reloading, it had happened that fast.

LILLIAN, talking with Brick Sills, turned from him to see her brother and Coe coming along the new road. Both grinned like kids who had played hooky and gotten away with it.

"I explained to Brick," Lillian said hastily, before either could speak, "how you both were called away suddenly."

"Yeah," Sills grunted. "We was all ready to quit when Miss Lillian sort of shamed us into going to work." The foreman eyed Bronson's bandaged head and Coe's shredded clothes. "I thought I heard shooting way up on the mountain a while back," he added, "but I guess I must of been mistook. Do you boys figure it's safe for the men to keep on working?"

"You bet," was Bronson's quick answer. "In a couple of weeks we'll be through this bad stuff, and from there on it'll be a cinch."

He led Sills away, but the foreman, being a romantic sort, peeked back. He saw Coe's arms reaching toward Lillian, and she was moving to meet them when the calico pony got in the way—darn it all.

"Everything's all right now?" Lillian asked, reading the answer in his eyes.

"All right," Coe said and he did not care a hoot if the whole construction crew was looking on. He kissed her.

BEFORE AND AFTER

NEARLY two hundred head of bulls, cows and calves, all pure-bred Hereford stock, were sent out from McCook, Nebraska, to Dallas, Texas, by regular passenger train. The shipment took thirty-six hours en route. This same shipment, had it been made on the old Texas trail in the latter part of the Nineteenth Century, would have taken over three months.

Silver Horn Breaks

PART IV.

By

LUKE SHORT

A FEUD exists for twenty years between San Patricio and Wintering Counties, and residents of neither county find it safe to go into the neighboring county in all that time. Nevertheless, a tired and sleepy deputy sheriff of Wintering is seeking to lodge a prisoner with the sheriff of San Patricio at Wagon Mound, and arrives there just as a bank holdup is in progress.

The deputy, realizing that the bank is being held up, reaches for his gun. One of the holdup men shoots the deputy in the back. The bandits escape toward Wintering. A posse follows.

Sheriff Will Wardecker of San Patricio clumps across the street on a crutch and questions the slain deputy's prisoner, Webb Cousins.

Webb tells the sheriff he is wanted in Wintering on a framed charge of train robbery two years before. Since that time, Webb explains, he has been working on a desert ranch.

Buck Tolleston, the banker, a small, hard-bitten man, tells the sheriff that the robbers took seventy-five thousand dollars from the bank and killed Patton, the cashier. The sheriff tells him that the bandits headed for Wintering County, and Tolleston rages. He bellows that the robbers are safe once they get to Wintering, where no San Patricio man ever voluntarily sets a foot.

When he hears the details of Webb's movements and learns he was in custody of a Wintering deputy, the banker believes he sees the pattern. He accuses Webb and McWilliams, the slain officer, with being "in cahoots" with the robbers, and declares the whole plot was organized in Wintering.

Tolleston then insists that Sheriff Wardecker arrest Webb. The sheriff refuses and Tolleston, determined that Webb shall not get away, makes a suggestion—he will take Webb to his Broken Arrow spread. The sheriff agrees, although he is inclined to believe in Webb.

Buck Tolleston is bitter against Wintering County, as he is still smarting from the fact that, years before, he had owned that county and had been chased from it by the Bannisters, now the Wintering cattle lords.

No wonder Buck is resentful, for there is no outlet for the products of the San Patricio ranches that is not disastrous. If they take their cattle to the nearest railroad—at Bull Foot in Wintering—their herds are attacked by feudists and diminished. They also lose many head going through the treacherous and rocky Silver Horn Breaks. Extension of the railroad to Wagon Mound seems to be their only salvation.

Webb's reception at the Broken Arrow is anything but cordial, although he gains a smile from Buck's daughter, Martha, who comes in from a mysterious ride. Buck sends a hand to investigate Webb's story of employment on a distant ranch, and another—Mitch Budrow—to Wintering to learn what he can to bolster Buck's idea that the holdup was engineered by that county. He wants proof to arouse San Patricio ranchers to making a raid on Wintering.

When the men go, Buck tells Webb his job will be to spy on Martha, and see where she goes on her mysterious rides.

Unbeknown to Buck, Mitch Budrow is a Bannister spy, and when he arrives in Wintering, Mitch goes direct to Wake Bannister with Buck's plans. Bannister sends him back to the Broken Arrow, telling him to report when he learns definitely the plans for the raid. Bannister is anxious for the climax of the feud—in fact, he inspired the bank holdup to bring that climax on—and plans a counter attack on San Patricio. He means to cripple the San Patricio ranchers before the railroad extends its line, which is imminent, he knows. San Patricio is ignorant of the railroad's plans as Hugo Meeker, Bannister's foreman, has held up the mail stage and extracted the railroad's letter telling Sheriff Wardecker of the proposed extension.

Webb, on a wind-broken horse to prevent his escape, follows Martha, and finds her in an arroyo waiting for some one. When the some one arrives, it is Britt Bannister, son of the lord of Wintering. Webb hears them discuss the feud in the light of their mutual affection—they declare it is silly. Britt is urging Martha to go to Bull Foot and marry him, when a slip of ground tumbles Webb off the rim of the arroyo into their midst. Britt immediately covers him with guns, but Martha discloses Webb's identity. Webb tells them of his job. They argue how to dispose of him, and finally Britt agrees to take him home with him—his personal prisoner, he promises Martha, and not to be turned over to the sheriff on the train robbery charge. They leave for Wintering.

When Wake Bannister asks him about the stranger, Britt frankly explains that he had gone to Broken

Arrow to see Martha Tolleston and had caught Webb spying. He says he has given Martha his word that Webb would not be turned over to the law. "Keep it," Wake directs.

Sensing that Britt takes the feud lightly, Wake tells him how it started; how the Tollestons had framed him on a murder charge, had sent him to the penitentiary for six years, had turned his wife, Britt's mother, out of their home; how, shortly after his release, she had died from privations she had endured. The story fires Britt to join actively in the feud.

Meanwhile, the ranchers of San Patricio are assembled by Tolleston, who reiterates his conviction that the bank robbery was planned in Wintering and that Webb, now escaped, was one of the bandits. Mitch Budrow is introduced and he tells of seeing the robbers meeting with Hugo Meeker in Bull Foot. Mitch's story inflames the ranchers and they agree to aid Buck in his plans to burn Bull Foot and the Bannister ranch.

CHAPTER X.

RECEPTION PLANNED.

WEBB spent his first night in the single bunk at the far corner of the bunk house chained by leg irons to the upright. He spent the first day chained to the leg of the heavy table on which he and Lute and Shorty and another wry-faced Northerner played poker. No one from the main house came near him, and the day was dull for them all. Lute wanted to ride that afternoon, but he was afraid to take Webb with him. By night, the Montana men were sorry of their bargain, and, like children who have been kept in a house all day by rain, were in a savage mood by bedtime.

The next morning, Lute greeted Webb in a better humor.

"I'm goin' to take these things off you to-day."

"You might chain me to an anvil," Webb said dryly.

"I might. But I think I'm a good enough shot that I don't have to."

Webb knew this was a warning, but he was glad of this new freedom. If he made just one bad move, he knew Lute would kill him, and do it cheerfully. Lute was tough, wise, seasoned, experienced enough in things of this sort that he was far more effective in keeping Webb a prisoner than a strong jail would have been.

At breakfast over in the bunk house that morning, Webb found that Lute would talk. It seemed that Lute and his men were allowed the freedom of the ranch—all, except the big house. They could ride wherever they chose, except north and into Bull Foot. They could drink all they wanted, and had an account at the store and the *cantina*. But they were forbidden to associate with the ranch hands and to talk to strangers. That seemed liberal enough to Webb, opening many avenues of possible escape.

Back at the bunk house, Britt Bannister was waiting for him, his face a little grim, so that Webb wondered if, after all, Bannister was going to turn him over to the law.

Outside, he and Britt Bannister squatted against the wall and rolled smokes, while Lute watched them idly from the door.

"I'm sorry I had to do this," Bannister began.

"I'll bet you are."

"The reason I'm sorry," Bannister went on, "is because I don't want to do it. Nothing would please me

more than having you ride over to Buck Tolleston and tell him what you heard."

Webb looked sharply at him, then away. "Sure," he mocked. "Why don't you, then?"

"Because I gave that killer's wench my word," Britt said bitterly.

Webb simply pivoted on his heel, unfolding like a coiled spring and drove his fist into Britt Bannister's face. Bannister's head snapped back against the wall and then he slumped over on his side and lay still. Webb looked up to see both Lute's guns trained on him.

Lute walked over to him. "Now, why in hell did you do that?"

"Ask him," Webb said thickly, and started for the bunk house.

Lute bawled for his partner, who took over the job of carting Britt away while Lute watched Webb. Webb stood there in the door of the bunk house, rubbing his stinging knuckles. He didn't know why he did that. The action was purely automatic, a thing he would have done had he heard any decent woman slandered. But he wondered what had got into Britt, what change had come over him since last night.

In a few minutes, Britt walked over to the door, declining the help Lute's partner offered. He paused in front of Webb, his hand to his jaw.

"Maybe you don't know where you are," he said thickly.

"About two steps from a shot in the back," Webb answered.

Britt said jeeringly: "So she looks good to you, eh?"

"Good enough to keep her name out of your mouth."

Lute put in quietly to Webb: "Son, you spraddle him again, and I'm liable to get mad."

Britt ignored Lute, as did Webb. They stood perhaps six feet apart, sizing each other up, glaring at each other like two wary dogs who only need a word to battle.

Then Britt sneered. "She's killer's spawn, Cousins. You can like her if you want, but you can't change that. Her old man's a murderer and all her kin are as bad. She is, too." It was not the anger in Britt's face that Webb noted; it was the bitterness in his voice.

"That's a different story from what I overheard yesterday," Webb said.

"Shut up, damn you!"

Webb went on: "It seemed yesterday you both agreed to use your heads in this ruckus when nobody else was doin' it. You both hated this feud." He smiled quietly. "What's the matter? Have a bad dream?"

WITH a snarl in his throat, Britt came at him. Webb put both hands on the doorsill, raised his foot and stopped Britt's rush by placing a boot in his chest and pushing. Bannister went down, sprawling on his back. Webb turned to Lute: "What am I goin' to do, let him beat me up?"

"If you're smart, you will," Lute said.

"Then I ain't," Webb said flatly.

He stepped off the doorsill to the ground, facing Britt, who was just rising. Bannister did not wait a second. He lunged at Webb, arms flailing. Webb chopped down on Britt's forearm, grunting as the deflected blow caught him in the stomach. His left hand, ready-cocked, looped over in a hook that caught young Bannister behind the ear. It was as if sudden paralysis took hold of him. His guard dropped and he stood there shaking his head groggily.

Suddenly, Hugo Meeker's voice whipped out across the bright morn-

ing. "Hit him again and I'll kick you from here to Bull Foot."

Webb looked up. Hugo was lounging against a corner of the bunk house, a cigarette pasted to his lower lip. Webb let his hands down to his side and stepped away.

"I've licked him twice in fifteen minutes. If you don't want him mussed up, take him away."

Hugo slouched over. He grabbed Britt by the shirt and tilted his head back and then slapped him sharply a half dozen times. Then he said to Lute's partner: "Take him over to the main bunk house."

Britt gone, Hugo turned to Webb. He had not yet taken the cigarette from his mouth.

"Because that kid can't scrap, don't think the rest of us can't."

"I hadn't even thought about it," Webb drawled. "But when somebody swarms all over me, I swarm back."

Hugo looked at him coldly and did not even wait for him to finish, but walked away. Webb sat down on the doorsill, breathing hard. Lute came out and squatted against the wall and rolled a smoke.

"Now you've done it," he said impersonally.

"Sure."

They were quiet a long time. Webb built his morning smoke, and dragged its raw bite into his lungs. Lute, by his own predatory reasoning, had pretty well called the turn. Webb cursed himself. He was in enough of a jam without leaping to the defense of a girl he had seen only twice in his life, and who was the daughter of a man who was persecuting him. If he had expected any favors here, he might as well forget it.

"Who was that ranny that took him off?"

"Hugo Meeker, the ramrod."

Webb smoked moodily. Presently Lute said: "What're you here for, son?"

Webb told him the whole story from the time they had met in Wagon Mound. When he was finished, Lute said: "But this train stick-up? Was you in on it or was this a frame-up?"

Webb, who had told his story idly and without much interest, suddenly came to attention, aware of the implications of Lute's question. If he told Lute he was guilty, wasn't there a possibility that Lute might look upon him as one of the fraternity to which he belonged? He hesitated.

"O. K.," Lute said idly. "None of my business."

Webb smiled. "Hell, yes, I was guilty. Do you think I'd 'a' let them bring me clean over here if I could've helped it."

"I was wonderin'," Lute said, looking at him.

At this moment, Shorty, who had taken Britt to the bunk house, returned. He sat down beside Lute and glanced over at Webb.

"If I wasn't bein' paid to hold you here, I'd tell you to take a horse and high-tail it," he told Webb.

Webb spat carelessly.

Then Shorty's attention was shifted. He said to Lute, "Somethin's up around here."

"Like what?"

"Ain't a rider goin' out this mornin'. They're all around the bunk house, waitin' for orders."

"Talk to any of 'em?"

"Not me," Shorty said. "I'm gettin' paid to be a little choosey about who I talk with."

Lute laughed and they talked of other things. But Webb wondered. Bannister must be expecting trouble of some sort—or planning it. When there was a break in the conversation, he asked idly: "How

many hands has Bannister got here?"

"There's about thirty over there now," Shorty said.

"Doin' what?" Lute wanted to know.

"The last I seen a good half of 'em was leadin' their ponies over to get shod."

Webb scowled. He was about to suggest having a look when Lute said: "I could stand a drink."

"Let's go," Shorty said.

THEY all went into the *cantina* together. It was a shabby adobe, its shelves lined with cheap wines and whiskies and *tequilas*. Bannister had long since learned that a Mexican will work contentedly if he has a wife, and liquor to drink. Thus, the peons who tended and irrigated his vast hay flats down by the creek, who herded his vaster sheep herds far up on the western slopes of the Frying Pans, who trapped and drove in his wild horses, all had families and this *cantina*, the only two things needed by them, to make a town.

Webb had a drink with Lute and Shorty, and then they moved on up to Mooney's store, where they sat on the broad porch and watched the activity.

The plaza on which the store fronted had a holiday air about it. Riders conversed in several groups and waited while the anvil over in Winrow's blacksmith shop clanged steadily. Webb noticed that the Dollar hands apparently had two duties: to take their horses over to be shod and to drop into Mooney's for shells.

Lute watched it all with mounting curiosity.

"Looks like a fight," he said once.

"Find out," Webb suggested.

Lute grunted. But he was only human. After a half hour on Mooney's porch, Lute lounged to his feet, saying to Shorty, "When you see me come out of the *cantina*, come around in back of this place," and he headed across the plaza. In a few minutes, he came out of the *cantina*, and Shorty said to Webb: "Walk around in back."

Lute, when he joined them, had a bottle of *tequila* hidden in his shirt front. He grinned sheepishly at Webb. "I'm goin' to find out what this is all about."

They ended up at the main horse corral, which was in charge of a Mexican wrangler. The three of them lined up on the top rail and waited for the wrangler to come over to them. He did, eventually, and Lute yarned with him about horses. Already, the wrangler had an excellent opinion of these five Montana men who rode such good horses, and he listened to Lute's sage observations with the air of a pupil listening to a master. Lute, still talking, pulled out his bottle of *tequila*, offered Shorty and Webb a drink, which they accepted, and then offered the bottle to the Mexican. He looked around uncomfortably and then said: "Come with me, señor. Me, I'm not s'pose to dreenk."

Lute laughed and went with him into the barn. They were gone a long time. When Lute finally returned without the bottle, he motioned the others off the fence and when they were safely away, said: "I got it."

"What is it?" Shorty asked.

"He didn't know for sure. But he thinks there's a raid bein' planned."

"Hell, I could 'a' guessed that. Where?"

"San Patricio County, so the talk goes."

Webb listened with expressionless

face, but he was thinking of what had been told him that night in Tolleston's house. Then Budrow had somehow learned that these hardcases were working for Bannister, and he had taken the news back to Tolleston. Which meant, if Tolleston's hunch was correct, that the San Patricio ranchers had already banded together for a raid. Was this arming on the part of Bannister a defensive measure?

That afternoon, Webb was to find out, for Hugo Meeker came into the bunk house. At his entrance the lackadaisical poker game was suspended.

Hugo, cigarette in lower lips, came to the point immediately.

"Noticed all the commotion outside?"

"Uh-huh," Lute told him.

"It's here," Hugo said. "Tonight, the San Patricio outfit aims to raid Bull Foot, and then the spread here. They don't know we know it. About the time they get deep into Winterin', three quarters of their spreads over there will be burnin'. So will Wagon Mound."

Lute whistled. "Anything for us to do?" he asked, then.

"No. If this thing works out, those rannihans from across the line will run into a surprise in Bull Foot. They'll be lucky if a fifth of them get out alive. But they aim to raid this spread, too. Now I don't reckon they'll still have that same idea when they leave Bull Foot, but just in case they do, we want to be ready for 'em."

HE went on to explain that the bulk of the Dollar riders would be over in San Patricio, with only a skeleton crew here at the ranch and in town. The Mexicans had been armed, so that they could defend the place. Meeker wanted Lute and his men to draw ammunition from Mooney and be ready to assist in the defense if they should be needed. The triangle over at the blacksmith shop would sound the warning in case of raid. There was hardly any possibility of one, Meeker reiterated, but they wanted to make sure.

After he was gone, the play was resumed. Webb stared at his cards, but he was not seeing them. This, then, would spell the finish of San Patricio's revolt. Its men would walk into a trap, its homes and ranches and town would be burned. The thought of it made Webb a little sick. He thought of gentle, reasonable Wardecker and what would happen to him. And to Tolleston, not gentle, not reasonable, but, Webb believed, a man who might have a kinder side. And to Martha Tolleston, who had put her trust and hope in a man who thought her a "killer's wench," a man who knew that by night she would be homeless and fatherless and would help to make her so.

"Wake up, cowboy. It's checked to you," Lute's voice was saying. Webb grinned a little and resumed playing. But he was thinking, and the more he thought, the more absent-minded he became.

Finally, Lute, in exasperation said: "Hell, fella, if you played this way all the time, I'd make some money."

Webb yawned, and said carelessly: "Sure, and when you want some more, you'll hire out to a big wind like Bannister and let him kick you around for a month when you could be makin' money, big money."

Lute looked hard at him. "Leastways, I never got pulled in by a tank-town sheriff on a job yet."

"What good does it do you?" Webb drawled. "Hell, you stuck up

a bank the other day. Three days later you're broke."

"And what if I am?" Lute said softly. He was getting mad.

Webb shrugged. "Oh, nothin'. You'll sit around here like a squaw over a bucket of tea and let other jaspers make the money."

"Like who?" Lute said belligerently.

Webb thought a moment, then suddenly grinned and reached for the cards. "Nothin'. Forget it. I'm just sore, I reckon."

"What about?"

Webb jerked his thumb in the direction of the big house. "All those thirty-dollar-a-month cowpokes goin' on that ride and not knowin' what to do with it."

Shorty looked at Lute. "How you mean?" he said to Webb.

"Why, there's big spreads in that county. Money, horses, guns, gold—and women."

Lute said, "Well, what about it?"

Webb shrugged and started to shuffle the deck. "Nothin'. Only we sit here like a bunch of women, protectin' the spread of a big stuffed Stetson just because we was told to."

"We?" Lute said dryly. "Hell, you couldn't leave if you wanted to."

"That's right," Webb agreed idly. "It's a damn shame, too, because I reckon I know that county."

The seed had been planted. Webb watched it work. The game soon broke up, and they drifted out to the plaza again to watch preparations. Lute was restless, as was Shorty. The other three Montana men—Wes, Manny, and a vicious-looking one, named Perry Warren—usually slept all day, drinking a little, but to-day they seemed to catch a little of the unrest. They, too, lounged around the plaza. Lute started drinking in the early afternoon, and by dark he was drunk. It was the dangerous kind of drunk, Webb knew; the man got quieter, his eyes got sharper, his brain more active, and his speech was quick and hard and cruel.

Dark had just come when the Dollar riders scattered to get their mounts. Afterward, the whole cavalcade rode through the plaza and out north, Hugo Meeker, Britt Bannister and Wake Bannister, whom Webb had never seen, heading them.

The Mexicans and a few odd ranch hands lined the plaza to watch their exit. Lute watched with hard, jeering eyes, Webb noticed. The Montana men went back to the bunk house, but Lute stopped in at the *cantina* to get a couple of bottles. Back in the bunk house, he did not join the perpetual poker game, but drank quietly, moodily. Webb was playing with a patience that was close to the breaking point.

But he was not surprised when Lute said suddenly: "How good do you know San Patricio, Red?"

"Fair. I know how to get to two or three ranches."

"Big ones?"

"Uh-huh."

"Which ones?"

"Tolleston's. The Chain Link."

CHAPTER XI.

BROKEN ARROW.

LUTE grunted and lapsed into silence. But Shorty was watching him now, and the poker game seemed to lack interest for everybody concerned. Presently, Shorty said morosely: "I don't hear no raid alarm."

Lute shifted restlessly. Every one in the room, including Webb, was looking to Lute for leadership.

Suddenly Shorty said: "Why don't we go, Lute?"

"And have one of these Mexes tell Meeker? Huh-uh."

"How they gonna know?" Shorty persisted.

"They can come over here and look."

Shorty was silent a moment, his forehead creased, his pig eyes greedy.

"How about just a couple of us goin'?"

Lute did not answer immediately. The other three hard cases seconded Shorty.

"All right," Lute said, rising. "Two of us'll go, and three stay here. But I'm goin', see?" He looked at them belligerently. "Anybody want to argue that?" Nobody did, and then he explained why. "Cousins has got to go because he knows the way. I got to guard him—unless I want to get a shot in the back. You rannies can cut cards to see who gets to side us."

Shorty, with his accustomed luck at cards, cut a king high, and the other three, after some mild cursing, resigned themselves to staying. Lute wasted no time. He picked up a rope from the bunk, flipped up his gun and said to Webb:

"You're goin' to ride, son. Bring the saddles, Shorty. Shorty gave Webb his, took the others, and they went out into the night.

Lute left Webb behind Mooney's with Shorty guarding him and went to confer with the wrangler. In a few moments, he returned leading three of the big Northern horses.

Lute made a thorough job of tying Webb's feet under his horse's belly and tying his hands, then they mounted and rode quietly past the corrals south, circled and spread and once clear of the ranch buildings, headed north.

Webb figured that the Dollar riders had an hour's start on them, but to offset this advantage they were certain to travel slowly and carefully. They would probably head first for Wagon Mound, and then, after it was burned, split up into raiding parties. If Webb traveled hard and straight, he might be able to reach Tolleston's before Bannister's riders did. He would try.

Lute asked questions only once, and that was to find out where they were going.

"Tolleston's Broken Arrow," Webb told him.

"Is that big?"

"Big enough."

"Any loot?"

"Plenty," Webb told him. "Do you think I'd be riding for it like this if there wasn't?"

Webb set a stiff pace and held it and it seemed to satisfy his guards. Riding through those long hours, he turned over in his mind the chances he had of escaping. If he could only get to the Broken Arrow before Bannister's riders, he could do something. He didn't know how he could escape, but escape he would, and it would have to be in time to save Tolleston's house and buildings. By the time they reached there, Lute would be drunk. Even if he were more dangerous than usual, he would be less careful. From Shorty, Webb had nothing to fear.

It lacked a full four hours of daylight when Webb pulled up on the lip of ridge behind the house and said: "She lies down yonder."

"No one been here yet," Lute observed with satisfaction.

He pulled the bottle from his hip pocket, had a drink with Shorty and they dismounted.

"What's the lay down here?" Lute asked Webb.

"Untie me and I'll show you."

"You likely would," Lute observed dryly. "All the same, you

stay here, fella. And I'll hobble your horse to make sure you do."

Webb chuckled. "*Bueno,* but how about leavin' me a drink for company, anyway?"

"Sure," Lute said agreeably, for the bottle was empty. Shorty hobbled Webb's horse, and before they left, Lute handed up the empty whisky bottle and laughed. Webb thanked him politely, and listened to their footsteps on the rocky slope die into the silence of the night.

This was easier than he had hoped for. Waiting until he was sure they were out of hearing distance, he took the bottle in both hands and brought it down sharply on the saddle horn. It shattered, but in several large shards, two of which were in his hands. Rising up in the saddle, Webb took the half which was the top and placed the neck under him, then sat on it, wedging it between him and the swell. The razor-sharp edge stuck up and by maneuvering a little, he found that he could get his bound wrists in a position where he could drag the ropes over the glass edge. After cutting himself twice, he succeeded in sawing one strand, and then pulling, straining, manipulating it with his teeth and tugging until his wrists bled, his hands were soon free of the rope. It was the work of only a few moments to cut the rope which held his feet together and in their stirrups, and he was free.

He went quickly to the other two horses to see if either Lute or Shorty had carried a carbine in the saddle boot, but he found them both empty. Turning, he started down the slope. He was unarmed, but it would take more than the lack of a gun to stop him this night.

In the shelter of the wagon shed behind the house, he paused to get his breath and listen. Even as he was watching, he saw a light go on in the house. That would be the answer to Lute's hammering on the door. Webb broke into a run, hoping wildly that Martha Tolleston would have sense enough to answer the door with a gun. And as soon as he wished it, he thought of what Lute would do. Shoot her probably.

At the corner of the house, he slowed down, and looked around it cautiously. There was Shorty standing in the light streaming from the door with a drawn gun pointing at the inside of the house. Lute, then, was already inside. The light was receding now, as if somebody had been holding a lamp and was backing into the room. Shorty stayed where he was.

Webb dropped to his knees and began to crawl forward. Shorty took a step so that he stood directly in the doorway. Webb edged closer. He could hear voices now raised in anger, and one of them was Martha Tolleston's. And then, as Webb crept forward, his hand closed over a rock. Automatically, he picked it up and continued. Now he was close to the porch, and Shorty was still in the door.

Quietly, softly, he straightened up, swung a leg over the rail, had one foot directly behind Shorty, and then swung the other over.

But he didn't swing his leg high enough. His spur caught and jangled, and Shorty whipped around, swinging his Colt up.

Before Shorty had time to focus his eyes, Webb smashed the rock down on his head. Shorty sagged into Webb's arms and Webb grabbed the gun, dumped Shorty over the rail and leaped into the doorway.

Before him, Martha Tolleston was facing Lute. Beside her stood Mrs. Partridge, the lamp in her hand.

Lute was saying: "He's got a

safe, sister. Did you ever hear of a cattleman that——"

"Lute!" Webb whipped out.

Lute turned. He had holstered his gun, thinking Shorty all the protection he needed. Now he regarded Webb, and a thin smile broke over his face.

"Well, well, *compadre*. Give us a hand," he said softly, mildly.

"The only hand you'll get is a filled one, fella. Make your play," Webb drawled, and he holstered his gun, the act itself an open invitation for a gun fight.

He wanted to look at Martha, to see her face. He heard Mrs. Partridge's low moan, but he did not look at her either. It was Lute, hard-eyed, smiling narrowly, arrogantly, whom he was watching.

Lute started to say, "So this was a——" and he stopped, listening. The sound of some one running close to the house came to them.

Lute grinned. "All over, is it, Shorty?" he asked, looking beyond Webb.

Webb started to turn when the girl screamed. Webb's hand whipped down, just as Lute, his right hand streaking for his gun, reached out with his left to yank the girl in front of him. Webb's gun shuttled out, up, and when hip-high, exploded deafeningly. He paused only long enough to note that Lute hunched in his chest and took a step back, dragging Martha with him, and then he whirled, to be greeted by the orange of gun blast that seemed to explode his head in a million pinwheels of stars.

When he awakened, he was lying on the ground in front of a crowd of watching horsemen. The night was bright, and he turned his head to see what made it so. There, fifty yards ahead of him, the Tolleston spread was in flames. He could hear voices and raised up on an elbow. Behind him stood Martha Tolleston, her face utterly dead and expressionless. Besides her was Mrs. Partridge, crying softly, and beside her was Charley, the cook.

Mounted on a big bay beside and behind them sat Wake Bannister at the head of his riders.

Webb slowly dragged himself to his feet and started toward Martha when he stumbled and pitched on his face. It was Lute and Shorty, both dead, who had tripped him. He looked up into the cold eyes of Martha Tolleston.

Wake Bannister said: "So they didn't get you?"

Charley, the cook, looked murder at him.

"It wasn't my fault," he said grimly.

Wake Bannister chuckled and said to Webb: "You'd have deserved it, friend, if they had." And he added dryly: "Did you object to being left home to-night?"

Meeker pulled his horse over to Webb.

"I thought I told you men to guard the spread."

Webb, quietly amazed, looked over at Martha. She was watching him with that cold disgust with which she would have regarded loathsome carrion.

"Perhaps he and his friends didn't want to be left out of your picnic," she said quietly. "They were fighting over which one would make me open dad's safe."

Meeker raised his quirt and lashed it across Webb's face.

"You tinhorn," he said quietly and wheeled his horse. To one of the riders he said, "Get this man's horse and tie him on it."

Webb stood teetering there, unable at once to comprehend. And

then he thought he understood. Martha Tolleston had naturally assumed that he and Shorty and Lute had come together. What Lute had said in greeting there in the house had confirmed this. What had stampeded the gunfight and what Lute had hoped would turn it to his advantage was the approach of Charley, who Lute thought was Shorty. Webb had shot Lute, and had been tagged in turn by Charley. And Charley's reason for running to the house was to warn Martha that a band of riders—Bannister's raiders—was approaching.

Bannister's voice interrupted his thoughts. "Well, boys, I guess the job is done. Let's move on." To Martha he said: "When Buck Tolleston comes back from his raid on Bull Foot—and I hope he doesn't—just ask him whose idea this was, Miss Tolleston." He made a mock bow, and gestured toward the burning house. "In this, you have the heartfelt compliments of the Bannisters. Good night, ma'am."

A rider came up to Webb with one of the horses. Webb mounted it dizzily. His head was sticky with blood, and his ear still numb where Charley's bullet had creased him. The rider tied him to the saddle and Webb wearily submitted.

His break for freedom had been futile, his attempt to warn Martha Tolleston of the raid had turned against him, and he was a prisoner again, and this time one who would merit any punishment that Hugo Meeker could think up.

Maybe he had been unwise to try it in the first place, for she would have been unable to do anything to save the spread. But this quiet, grave girl who held so much courage and fire and womanliness deserved more than this—the betrayal of the man she was to marry, and the revenge of the man who hated all her family.

The man who had tied him mounted. "Get on."

Webb rode past Martha. She spoke one word to him, and that very quietly. "Tinhorn," she said, repeating Hugo's word.

There was one consolation, Webb thought bitterly, as he fell in with the others. Lute and Shorty, the only two men who knew he had been ready to betray Bannister were dead. With them out of the way, perhaps escape next time would be easier.

For escape he would. He had taken sides in this affair, whether he was wanted or not. He was a San Patricio man now, but hated by them more than he was by his captors.

CHAPTER XII.

RED NECKERCHIEF.

AFTER the cattlemen's meeting had broken up that afternoon, Mitch Budrow hunted out Tolleston, who was talking to some ranchers. He did not join the group on the bank steps, but waited patiently until he caught Tolleston's attention.

"You want me, Budrow?" Buck asked.

"If you got a minute," Mitch said diffidently. Tolleston excused himself from the group. "Well?" he said to Mitch.

"I'd like to write a letter and get it out on to-night's stage," Mitch told him. "I wondered if you'd be around long enough for me to do it."

"Letter?" Tolleston asked, and then smiled slightly. "A girl, Mitch."

Mitch grinned. "Yes, sir. I got a letter from her the other day and somehow I ain't had time to answer it."

"Go ahead," Buck told him. "I'll

be in town a long while yet." He turned to go, then paused. "Be careful, Mitch. No word to her about what we've planned."

"Sure. She lives in Tucson, anyway. It's just about a few head of cattle we was aimin' to buy—her and me. She needed a little money."

"You got it?" Buck asked.

"I reckon."

Buck reached in his pocket and drew out a roll of bills. He peeled off some and handed them to Mitch. "Maybe that'll buy you a few more head, Mitch. That's for the work you've done."

Mitch looked at the money, speechless for the moment. Then he stammered: "I—I sure do thank you. That'll please her."

Buck ignored the thanks and returned to his conversation. Mitch pocketed the money and went down the street to the Territorial House, fighting a feeling of self-loathing that was making him sick. On his way he stopped in and bought two drinks and then crossed to the hotel. He felt better.

At the desk he got some stationery and some envelopes and went over to the writing table. In full detail, he wrote down the plans that he had been listening to all afternoon. It included the date of the planned raid on Bull Foot, the time, the men who were leading, the number to expect, the full plans of how the town would be burned. Finished, he folded the paper and put it in an envelope which he addressed to Tom Kean, telegrapher and freight agent at Bull Foot. In this he was following Bannister's orders. Then he addressed the second envelope to a fictitious name and address in Tucson, stuffed the envelope with blank sheets of paper and went out.

At the post office in Samuelson's Emporium, he bought stamps from Samuelson himself.

"How long you reckon it'd take to get a saddle up here from Tucson?" he asked Samuelson.

"A week," the storekeeper replied.

"That's what the company said. They said I should have it by now."

"Maybe it's been held up somewhere."

Mitch nodded and looked at his letter. "Is the name of that there freight agent in Bull Foot, Kean?"

"That's right."

Mitch stamped the letter then. "Maybe this'll wake him up," he said mildly. "Hell, I'll bet it's layin' in his back room right now."

Samuelson said likely it was, and took Mitch s two letters. Then he looked around him and said in a low voice, "That was mighty nice work, Budrow. You deserve a heap of credit for that."

Mitch said: "My fun is goin' to come to-morrow night, I hope."

"Don't you worry about that," Samuelson said, and they shook hands on it. Mitch left and went down to the O. K. corral where he sat on a sack of oats and waited patiently for Tolleston. He figured his back trail was covered. He didn't feel like talking to Iron Hat Petty, who sat in a back-tilted chair under the arch. Iron Hat didn't feel like talking either, so they were both silent. Mitch felt as if he never wanted to talk again.

MITCH remained that way until the next afternoon. Two hours before dusk, the ten riders of the Broken Arrow, headed by Tolleston, saddled up and headed in the direction of Wagon Mound. There was a rank smell of kerosene about them, which seemed to come from the fat slickers tied on the cantle of each saddle. It had to

do with the Bull Foot raid. Every man was to carry a sack of coal-oil-soaked rags wrapped in his slicker. Fires were easier to start that way and this depended on quick work.

Until dark, the Broken Arrow riders avoided trails. Then they took them because it was faster going. Two hours after dark, they had swung wide of Wagon Mound and were headed for Belly Butte, the huge landmark that lay almost on the county line.

Arriving at the west side of its base, they found riders already gathered, and the stench of coal oil filled the air. There was no smoking, no fires. The men stood quietly by their horses, and Mitch could not begin to count the number. But he figured roughly that seventy men were in this posse. The leaders were gathered together in the center of the band. Small diamonds of starlight glinted on carbines in saddle boots, on guns on hips, on rows and rows of belted cartridges. The talk was hushed, somber, and there was none of the usual joking and horseplay which is always present when cowboys meet.

Tolleston was greeted quietly.

"You timed it about right," Hasker said.

"Everybody here?"

"They will be any time now. We had to leave some of the boys in town to yarn with the stage driver, so it wouldn't look funny."

They reviewed their duties. Eventually part of the posse was to be split up into four groups of ten men each. Each group was to enter town in a different direction. They were to travel the streets slowly, smothering any premature alarm that the townsfolk would give. The rest were divided up into small squads which would travel the alleys and fire the buildings. Eight men carefully picked—and Mitch was among those eight—were to cover the two barrooms, four men to a saloon. They were to hold the customers at bay until the fire had a start. By that time, the town would be in flames, and panic would be in the streets. Then the four groups were to ride to the center of town and shoot up the long main street. Any man that fired on them was to be hunted down and exterminated, while the others were freeing saddle horses from the hitch racks and driving them off.

Then, once the limit of town was reached, the whole band would ride hell-for-leather for Wake Bannister's Dollar spread. A few men would drop back to cover the back trail. The plan seemed reasonable, all the way around.

When the last arrivals were present, every one mounted and the long ride to Bull Foot began. Opinion was that, by way of an old drive trail long in disuse but remembered by most of the older men present, it would take four hours to reach Bull Foot. This would put them in close to one o'clock. They did not miss it far. The ride was swift, businesslike, and these men kept the same grim silence, except to curse a horse now and then. As they traveled deeper into Wintering, the leaders went a little slower. The knowledge that discovery here would mean death tended to make them wary.

Passing over a long bench where they clung to the shadow of the bordering trees, Miles Kindry said to Tolleston: "I used to brand down off yonder by the creek."

"It's a nice range," Tolleston said quietly. "If this goes through, you'll get it back. Ted Bannister's on it now, ain't he?"

"One of that coyote clan," Miles replied. In spite of the fat which

made him hulk awkward in the saddle, in spite of the years that had passed since he laid claim to this range, there was a passion in his speech that might have been a key to the feelings of all these old-timers to-night.

Starlight and dust and horse lather and saddle creak enveloped Mitch, but he neither saw nor smelled nor heard them. In the note which he had sent to Kean yesterday he had added a footnote. It had told Bannister, almost apologetically, that he, Mitch Budrow, would be one of the men who were to hold up the Melodian. Would Bannister please inform the ambushers that he would be wearing a red neckerchief, so they might know him?

Now, he didn't know. He could almost feel fear creeping up on him, not to be banished. He knew his work for Bannister had been completed, and completed well. But now that Bannister had no more use for him, wouldn't he plan to get rid of him? After all, Mitch was the sole man outside of Hugo Meeker who knew the part Bannister had played in manufacturing this ambush.

To play safe, Bannister might wipe out all evidence, and Mitch bulked large as evidence—and the wrong kind. The longer he rode, the more insistent this thought became.

WHEN the posse reined up on the timbered hogbacks that lay to the east of Bull Foot, the lights of town were easily visible ahead and below. Bull Foot, since the day it was established, had been a tolerant as well as prosperous town. Settled in the wide fold of hills through which the railway managed to snake up from the south, it was larger than Wagon Mound. Its two main streets, crossing each other in the center of the town, were wider. The stores were more numerous, and they were painted. Behind the main street paralleling the tracks and on the shorter cross streets lay the courthouse, a two-story, white frame affair with jigsaw cupolas.

The town itself, in spite of the hour, was lighted. Some of the stores still held customers. The saloons were booming, and there were lights at the feed corral two doors north of the Melodian.

The leaders moved up in a circle for consultation.

"It looks like we've done it," Wes Anders said, quiet exultation in his voice. He had once been the largest stockholder in the solid-looking bank which squatted on the four corners below.

"Yes," Tolleston said, satisfaction in his voice. "Hasker, you're taking your men around west and down past the courthouse. You better start now."

Hasker had his men grouped. They left and followed the hogbacks to the south and were swallowed by darkness. The others split up, too, until only the eight who were to hold up the two saloons were left.

Mac said to them: "Well, my four, come along. And remember, boys, don't gallop in and don't sneak in. Just ride in."

Mitch joined his band. It was to ride in from the south. They sloped down to the road, crossed the tracks and turned up the main street. Mitch was alert for any sign that would give the ambush away, but he could find none. A scattering of people were on the streets, and the huge Bannister Mercantile was lighted and still held some customers. For a moment, Mitch wondered if maybe Bannister hadn't re-

ceived his letter. His spine started to crawl at the thought.

And then he looked up beneath his hat brim at the second story of the Wintering Hotel. Every window there was dark, every window open. Yes, Bannister had got the note all right.

In front of the Melodian the four of them dismounted.

"Watch your ties," Mike Sutton, a Seven A cowboy and their leader, said.

The din from the Melodian was loud and sustained, a commingling of talk, shrill laughter, glass clink, monotonous calls of the faro dealers, shuffling feet, and the insipid grind of a piano.

Mitch's hands fumbled as he tied his reins to the tie rail, so that the others had to wait for him.

Once on the sidewalk, he said: "This is a mighty big place for four of us to take."

The puncher he addressed turned a cold, hard face to him.

"You want to pull out?"

Mitch shook his head and managed to return the man's stare. "Did I say I did?"

"All right," Sutton said, and drew both his six-guns. The others, including Mitch, did the same. As Sutton had his hand out to push open the batwing doors, a drunken cow-puncher staggered out the other half of the door.

Sutton shoved him back into the room and stepped in, the others behind him. Mitch was last, and his face was plaster-gray. Sutton put a shot over the customers' heads into the bar mirror, and the din stopped as suddenly as if it had been a thread cut by a knife.

Sutton looked over the crowd, his guns covering them.

"Back up from the bar, folks," he drawled in the silence. "You barkeeps stay on deck and hoist your hands."

There was a general milling away from the bar. Suddenly somebody said in a low voice which carried clear over the room: "Ain't them San Patricio cowboys?"

"Right," Sutton replied. "San Patricio cowboys just rode over for their pay check."

It was quiet again. Mitch's hands were wet with sweat against his gun butts. He looked over the heads of the crowd. And then he saw something which yanked the breath out of his throat. On the back balcony, which was stacked with empty beer kegs, he saw a movement. Slowly, counting them, he saw the barrels of six shotguns nose through between the beer kegs and steady themselves.

With a strangled cry, Mitch turned and ran the two steps to the door. Even as he turned, he saw the puncher nearest him grab for him, cursing.

AND then "all hell broke loose." The shotguns blasted out in ragged peroration. Mitch felt a spatter of buckshot slap into the door, felt his ear snipped, and then he was outside, running upstreet.

From far upstreet, he heard a mighty blast of gunfire. That would be Mac's outfit getting it at the Running Iron. Mitch paused, looking behind him.

He could see a group of horsemen paused at the four corners. Even while he watched, another group joined them, and still a third. People began to pour out of the saloon. The horsemen let out a yell and started down the street.

Suddenly, a rifle cracked across the street and a slug buried itself in the board by Mitch's head. He moaned, and started to run.

And then the heavens opened up. A furious concert of gunfire rolled out like the crack of doom, and Mitch dived for an opening between two buildings. He paused just long enough to look back. All four groups of the San Patricio riders were galloping down the street, caught between two lines of gunfire. The whole town of Bull Foot seemed suddenly to appear from behind the false fronts of the stores and rain down leaden death into the street.

Riderless horses galloped by. The vanguard of the raiders passed Mitch now, their guns booming. Miles Kindry's big bulk was bent over his saddle horn, his reins trailing. Another rider slammed into his horse, and Miles toppled out of the saddle. A horse reared, and five blind riders piled into it and they went down in a moil of dust and screams, and the fire was directed toward it.

From the back alley now, Mitch heard the racket of shots. That would mean that the men who were firing the buildings had been ambushed.

Mitch shrank against the building, his eyes wild with panic. The street before him was a shambles. The San Patricio raiders were not even shooting now. To a man, they lay along the necks of their horses, Indian fashion, trying desperately to get out of town. Crippled horses spilled their riders; there was the raucous voice of a puncher cursing wildly as he tried to yank a down rider up on his saddle. Two men on the Wintering Hotel roof opened up. The cursing rider, in the act of giving his friend a hand up, raised up in his stirrups and the down rider pulled him over. Before the horse had a chance to shy, its front legs buckled and it, too, went down.

Mitch watched it to the bitter end, until the last escaping San Patricio rider was whipped out of the saddle and rolled in a cloud of dust until he was brought up sharply against the tie rail. The street was strewn with dead men and writhing horseflesh.

Then self-preservation took hold of Mitch with a vengeance. He suddenly remembered that some one had driven a shot at him from across the street—at him, who had made all this possible. Without even forming the words in his mind, he knew that that shot had been fired at Bannister's orders. He could imagine the word being passed around the whole town. "Get the man with the red neckerchief!"

Mitch whipped it off and stuffed it in his pocket and then turned toward the alley. He could hear men running on the board walk, their cries rising over the screams of dying men and horses.

Mitch halted at the back of the building. Men were back there. He could hear them calling to each other.

Casting frantically about him, he saw a barrel under an eavespout at the corner. He leaped for it, and climbed its rim and dropped inside. There was a foot of water in it, so cold it took his breath away, but he crouched down, fighting to still his laboring breath.

"Here it is," he thought with a kind of frantic calmness. "I've been dodgin' it for two years. And here it is."

He heard men shouting, heard them pound past him, the earth shaking gently beneath him. Then silence. He did not move.

Suddenly, a voice came clearly to him: "I tell you he went in here. Hell, didn't I shoot at him?"

"But he's gone," another voice said.

"He won't go far then. He's likely been cut down already."

"All right. Let it ride that way."

The first speaker cursed. "Let it ride?" he echoed. "Hell, do you know whose orders it was to get him?"

"Sure."

"All right, go get your drink. I'm lookin'."

THERE were footsteps. Then the second voice, fading now, but not so faint that Mitch didn't hear it plainly, said: "Can't we tie a red handkerchief on one of these dead rannies and say we thought it was him?"

Mitch didn't feel any surprise at this. It was if somebody had spoken what was inevitable and what he had known in his own mind. He crouched there, a kind of stupefaction soothing him.

"This," he was thinking, "is the end of the trail that began two years ago when I strangled that honka-tonk girl. I didn't know Bannister then; I didn't even know these two counties existed, but I might have known it. Some other place, some other man holding the gun. What's the difference? It couldn't help but end this way."

And then the panic returned and he was afraid again. He wanted to live, and he didn't care how. But the fear in him was not so strong that he could not see two things clearly. If he got out of here and rode to Tolleston again, he would be killed. His cowardice there in the saloon would be the pointing finger which would lead to a hang-noose death. If he stayed here in Wintering County, Bannister would hunt him out and gulch him. If he left Wintering County, there were those United States marshals, particularly the one from Tucson. For some months now he had known peace from them. But now, if he were always to live in terror of them, he would rather be dead. And Bannister would be sure to write, giving them his trail.

Mitch crouched there shivering. No, the best thing to do was to go to Bannister. Folks said Bannister never killed a man by his own hand. Go to Bannister, beg for mercy, for work, stay by him, never leave him until he gave his promise of safety. To Mitch, this idea had nothing of the daring about it. It meant life.

Waiting there was almost pleasant then, because he had hope. After another fifteen minutes in which he heard nothing but shouts and commotion on the street, he climbed out of the barrel and slunk down the alley. Halfway down it, a horse nickered. Mitch struck a light and saw a big bay standing there, a man lying face down beside the trailing reins. Mitch recognized him, recognized the horse. It was a Broken Arrow hand who owed him seven dollars. Apparently, the man had tried to run for his horse, for in one hand was a swab of oil-soaked rags, in the other his gun.

Mitch let the match die and took the horse, leading it down the alley. When he came to the cross street he boldly turned into it and rode out of town, not answering questions the townspeople on the walks called to him.

Once in the clear, he rode frantically for the Dollar spread. When he arrived, he rode into the plaza. Some Mexicans stopped him and asked him what had happened.

"*Nada*," Mitch said wearily. "Nothing."

He put his horse up in Mooney's corral and then made his way through the dark to Bannister's office. The door was locked. He

hunted around the front of the blacksmith shop for a scrap of iron, and finding one, broke the lock on the door. The office was dark. He didn't light a lamp.

He sat down in one of the chairs to wait, his eyes sleepless, knowing, believing, that if he went to sleep before he saw Wake Bannister, he would never wake.

CHAPTER XIII.

NIGHT OF DISASTER.

"TWENTY-TWO left out of seventy," Will Wardecker said gently into the night. "We were lucky."

All around him he could hear the labored breathing of blown horses, could smell gun smoke and blood. The forms around him he could not distinguish, but occasionally he could hear the caught breath of a man trying to hide pain.

"Buck Tolleston," Wardecker called.

"Yes," a voice answered from beside him.

Before Wardecker could speak, a puncher out in the night said: "My horse is blowed. I'm ridin' on! They'll be after us!"

"Stay here!" Buck ordered sharply. "They won't follow us! They don't have to." Then he said to Wardecker in a weary, dead voice: "Who's here?"

"Better ask," the sheriff said.

Tolleston called: "Hasker."

"I got through."

"Kindry."

No answer.

"Bindloss."

No answer.

"Anders, Pillsbury, Dale, Sweetser."

Sweetser answered. And so it went. Two out of seven names called answered. At the end of it, Tolleston, sick and miserable said: "Let's ride. This is no place for us."

Once under way, Wardecker turned his horse in beside Tolleston's. There was that comradeship between them which only years can bring, and to-night Buck Tolleston needed it more than he ever had before.

Wardecker said: "Who was it that sold us, Buck?"

"I don't know," Buck answered after a while. "Whoever it was, knew everything we planned and how to nail us down."

"I hope he's dead," Wardecker said. "I hope he has been shot in his guts and stays in agony for hours."

Tolleston said nothing, and presently Wardecker said: "No, I don't, either. I can't imagine anything worse than havin' to live with that crime on your mind. I hope he's alive."

Buck only sighed. Behind all the grief he felt over lost friends, over the ruin and desolation that this night would mean, loomed one fact that Buck was secretly ashamed of, but which he could no more deny than he could deny he was alive and safe. And that fact was that Bannister had won, finally and irrevocably.

Wardecker understood a little of what Buck was thinking. He said without any reproof: "Well, Buck, I reckon it took this to prove we're second fiddle."

"Yes," Tolleston said, not believing it.

The rest of the long night they rode in silence. The sunrise which caught them just over the county line did not help any. Some time in the night, a Chain Link rider had dropped out of his saddle without being heard. Almost all of them had gunshot wounds, some

bad, some not serious. Most were hatless, gray of face, exhausted, weary, beaten. Lou Hasker's right pants leg was stiff with blood, and he was not riding a Chain Link branded horse. Somehow, in that massacre when his horse was shot from under him, he had managed to catch another and ride free. His hard young face was pinched and wooden, and the old confidence seemed drained out of him, Tolleston noticed. Young Sweetser rode as if in a trance. But the bulk of the casualties had been borne by the punchers, as was always the case in range wars. A hard, loyal lot, they had sold their lives for a wage. Buck couldn't help but think of Mac. He, of course, was dead, killed in the shooting which started the fight.

Buck hung his head in shame and weariness, too numb to hate, even. He was riding in the rear of the group when they rounded the curve in the road that should have put them in sight of Wagon Mound, but he did not look up.

The first hint of anything wrong was the bitter wild cursing of a man up front. Then Buck noticed that these men had stopped. He reined around those ahead and walked his horse until he had a clear view of the shallow plain on which Wagon Mound was situated.

Ahead of him was a smoking heap of ashes, a long building—the brick bank—standing upright. The cottonwoods which had shaded part of the town were shriveled and sere.

Something died in Buck Tolleston then. He turned haunted eyes to Wardecker. When he tried to speak he couldn't, for a growing rage was throttling him. Savagely, he rammed his spurs into his tired horse, and galloped into town at the head of the weary band.

People—mostly women and children—were on the streets at the four corners, and Buck pulled up in a moil of dust to survey the sight. Everything was destroyed; stores, homes, buildings, corrals, everything that was inflammable—which meant the whole town. It was as level as the plain around it, except for the blackened fingers of a few stone chimneys which poked up from the charred ruins.

Iron Hat Petty hobbled up to the horsemen.

"They met you, I reckon," Iron Hat said.

And then a girl broke through the ranks of watchers.

"Dad! Dad!" she cried.

It was Martha. Buck took her in his arms and let her cry, holding her close, stroking her hair. Other women now were hunting their men, and those that did not find them were hearing out the story of the massacre in Bull Foot. Buck buried his face in Martha's hair and closed his eyes.

Presently, she looked up at him. "Can you stand any more of this, dad—more news that will hurt?"

Buck only looked at her.

"The spread was fired last night by Bannister. All the big places were. The Seven A, the Wagon Hammer, Pillsbury's, Winterhovens—all of them. Burned to the ground.

BUCK took it without a change of expression. A man can absorb only so much shock. The others were like him, too, unable to comprehend at first the extent of their loss.

Later, Buck took Iron Hat to one side.

"What happened, Iron Hat?"

"Just what you see. Bannister rode into town with half a hundred riders and took over the town.

Warned all the women and kids out of the houses and stores. Wally Hubbel thought he'd fort up in the sheriff's office and fight, so they just burned it down on top of him. Outside of that, I don't reckon there was a man killed. They drove all the horses in town off. Then they split and started ridin' over the county. Folks—mostly womenfolks—have been driftin' in all day with news of what they done. Most of the big ranches is burned clean to the ground, all except the Chain Link and yours. They was made of stone and wouldn't take fire, but they burned everything around it." Iron Hat recited this in his dull, flat voice. He needed whisky and there was none to be had.

Buck walked away from him. Wardecker had called a meeting of the men as they were resting in front of the bank.

"First thing we got to do is feed these women and kids," Wardecker said. "I'll need three men besides myself to rustle up a couple of beefs and haze 'em into town. Some of you others ought to dig around in the ashes and see if there's any flour left over in Samuelson's cellar. As soon as we get somethin' to eat, we can take stock."

By afternoon, a rude camp of sorts had been made in the street at the four corners. Beeves had been killed and skinned out, and the camp was fed. Children were sleeping. The women had taken over and there was some semblance of order. Again the men lying exhausted before the bank were wakened, and again Wardecker assumed charge.

"You'll all want to go back to your places," he began, "but first we ought to have some idea of what's in the future." He turned to Tolleston. "Buck, what do you think?"

"Build up the place again," Buck said immediately. "We got our stock, accordin' to what I've heard. We did it fifteen years ago. We can do it again."

Frank Winterhoven, a gnarled, silent man, who lived over west, spoke then. "Not me, Buck. I'm pullin' out. I ain't blamin' you nor any man for what happened, but I've had a bellyful. I got two youngsters, a few horses, a couple of wagons and plenty of cattle, but I owe notes that'll wipe me out, and I don't aim to fight over a dead horse. I'm pullin' out."

Several other men seconded him. Many of the big ranches in the county did not have a man left to run them. Most of them had borrowed money or saved it, and the bank robbery had cleaned them out. Buck could understand this, and he respected it, but he did not agree with it.

"I'm stayin'," he said quietly. "All my money's gone, my place is burned and the town's burned, but I'm stayin'. This country has kept me for fifteen years. I reckon it'll keep me another fifteen." He gestured south, and said quietly: "As for that outfit, I'll square myself with 'em one day. Time enough."

But the majority of them were apathetic, beaten. The younger men wanted to leave, all except those who were so small that Bannister had not bothered to burn them. Privately, they thought Buck old, a madman too set in his ways to ever change. They looked to Lou Hasker for advice. He refused to give it.

"You got to settle that for yourselves. I don't know what I'll do. When I get this leg healed up and see what's happened to my outfit, and figure what the chances of stayin' here and makin' a livin' are, then I'll tell you. But don't ask me."

So it went. Some joined in with Buck, others reserved their opinions, but many of them, the majority, intended to leave.

"As far as I'm concerned, Wardecker," Winterhoven said, "you can arrange for a sheriff's sale as soon as it's handy. And that goes for most of us. The sooner I pull out the better, and I reckon some others feel the same way about it."

"You're makin' a mistake, Frank," Buck said.

"I've made too many a'ready," Frank said grimly. "One more won't hurt."

To be continued in next week's issue.

COWBOY INVENTIONS

THE cowboy has been very handy in inventing and adapting labor-saving devices.

Some unknown hero who got tired of "heeling" calves all day with a lariat, invented the branding chute, a narrow passage between two corrals through which the calves are driven while a cowboy stands on the rail and tags each one with a hot branding iron as the animal passes through. The chute saves the time and energy involved in wrestling with the calves.

The primitive branding chute was improved from time to time by the addition of check gates, stocks, platforms, and suchlike gadgets, to assist in doctoring, dehorning and other necessary operations. All these were the brain children of cowhands who wanted to get their job done with more speed and less perspiration. Nowadays, there's not much roping and throwing at branding times, except on small out-of-the-way ranches where there are not enough cattle to warrant building a chute.

As soon as ranchers began to build fences, a cowboy's life immediately got complicated by gates. All day long he was piling off his pony, opening a gate, leading his horse through, closing the gate and piling on his horse again. That's one of the reasons that punchers hate fences. By and by, the cowhands quit cussing and commenced to scratch their heads over the gate problem.

The result was that a lot of them arrived at the brilliant idea of a self-opening gate! Being the product of half a dozen different brain storms, they vary a lot, both in construction and efficiency.

The best self-opener is swung on a central pole and can be opened from either side by the properly placed nudge of a horse's shoulder.

However, there are still thousands of gates all over the range country that are made by stringing three or four strands of barbed wire between a couple of short poles that are wired to fence posts, and it takes a Houdini to open most of them.

An interesting and fairly recent cowboy gadget is the "juice pole." This is an eight-foot pole with two metal prods at the business end. These are hooked up to the positive and negative wires of an electric line so that when the prods are firmly planted against a steer's hide, the animal receives a sharp but harmless shock that sends him flying up the loading chute and into the cattle car, thus entirely eliminating the snarls in cow traffic that are all too prevalent around a loading pen. C. L. M.

PANCHITA'S HEART

By HARRY R. KELLER

Along the streets of San Antone,
  Young "Bucky" Crews came cantering;
Erect and slim, he rode alone,
  His blue eyes gay and bantering.
Panchita, from her balcony,
  Cast one appraising glance at him,
And murmured very softly, *"Si!*
  I theenk I take a chance at him!"

These gringos! How they tumbled for
  The game that she could play so well!
"I theenk I love you. *Si, señor!*"
  No other trick could pay so well!
So when young Crews rode out at noon,
  Panchita spurred in quest of him;
And, by a drifting desert dune,
  She reined her horse abreast of him.

"I theenk I love you, *señor, si!*"
  Mocked Bucky Crews: "I'm gratified.
I hoped you'd try your game on me—
  Now justice shall be satisfied!
I came to strip your finger bare
  Of yon gold ring my brother wore;
I came to snatch from out your hair
  The carven comb my mother wore!

"My brother tumbled for your line;
  Your thieving fingers snared him, too!
I'm taking what is his—and mine!"
  Panchita's dark eyes dared him to.
He seized her in a savage grasp.
  She yielded comb and ring to him;
And, when he would have loosed his clasp,
  He felt her soft arms cling to him.

"No man has mastered me before—
  I cannot bear to part with you!
I swear that when you go, *señor,*
  You take Panchita's heart with you!"
He shook her loose, and turned to ride.
  "Keep that until a new love comes.
You've played your game too high and wide
  To ever know when true love comes!"

But, brimming with an ancient pain,
  Panchita's soft eyes followed him
Across the tawny Texas plain,
  Until the distance swallowed him.

LOOKOUT

By H. C. WIRE

Author of "Riding Blind," etc.

"BUT, Pete!" the girl insisted, "*why* can't I go with you?" And Pete Leonard answered without turning from the buckskin horse he was saddling: "Because, Anne, it's too dangerous. Up there on the ridge is no place for a girl now." He swung his head a little, his hands still tugging at a latigo strap. "And I mean it. Don't you come up. That's an order."

"Orders!" Anne Hayden said hotly. "I'm not under Forest Service orders!"

Pete grinned, painfully moving stiff, fire-scorched lips. "You're under mine, though. Now be good."

She stepped back into the smoke haze that was all around them, a slender, brown-haired girl dressed like a cowboy.

"If you loved me half as much as you love your job, you'd let me go. Of course it's dangerous. That's why I want to be with you. Pete—please! Women do go to firelines. Look at Bill Allen's wife last year."

"You are not," Pete Leonard told her, "my wife."

He drew the cinch tight, secured it, reached for his bridle reins, and flipped them over the buckskin's neck.

Then he faced Anne squarely. But the expression in her eyes

stopped him. They were very gray eyes, clear and warm, yet fixed now level, and subdued by the emotion behind them. Her lips were tightly pressed together.

He hadn't meant to hurt her. He looked down. His boots were caked with black ash, his shirt and breeches were streaked, and the skin all over his body felt like burned, shriveled leather. Campers who had seen Pete Leonard riding an untroubled routine patrol would hardly have recognized this tall, dark, haggard figure with red-rimmed eyes. Silent for a moment, he wondered if Anne knew what these past twenty-two hours of futile struggle meant to him.

SHE was speaking quietly. "Why didn't you let me see before, Pete? I do see now—the way you said that. I'm not your wife. I don't belong on the fireline with you. I don't even belong in this forest. Isn't that it?"

It was it, and Pete knew he would give anything if he could see it differently. He knew that when she went away for the winter, nothing would matter very much until she came back again in the spring. That is the way it had been for two years now—always the long wait until Tom Hayden returned for his summer fishing in the High Sierras, and brought Anne.

He looked at her, again forcing a smile on his cracked lips.

"Your father has let you drag him around the country all your life. You've lived in every State in the Southwest. That's all right, he can afford it, but it has spoiled you—and this is something different."

"What do you mean?"

"Just that you aren't contented in any place more than a few months. Nothing lasts with you very long. I've watched that, and I know it would be the same with this life here. You wouldn't stick."

Color deepened in her tanned cheeks. She started to turn away.

"All right. I'm a quitter. That's what you think."

He caught her hand. "Anne! You know what I think. You know I love you. But my life here is permanent; I was cut out to be a ranger—this forest is not just something fine and romantic for a little while. Nothing in the world can ever drag me out of it, and you and I would only be making an awful mistake."

He dropped her hand as a rider pounded out of the smoke and pulled to a stop at his side.

The man, one of his fire guards, leaned over. His face was a grimy mask. Hoarsely he said:

"It's broke clean away again everywhere, Pete! They want you."

Pete Leonard grabbed the saddle horn and hauled his stiff body upward. Then he looked down, holding tight reins, hating to leave Anne like this, with nothing understood, and a deep unhappiness filling both of them.

But she cried: "Go on! For Heaven's sake, don't stop now!"

He swung his arm and two mounted men leading mules started toward him from the station corrals. Axes, shovels, and the long, curved blades of brush hooks bristled from the mules' packsaddles.

"Shorty!" Pete ordered. "You go with Al, here. Get across to the crew on North Fork. Slim, you come with me. Oh, Lord," he breathed, "if only we had a lookout!"

His knees gripped the buckskin as the animal lunged forward. From a distance he looked back. Anne was watching, small and alone against

the huge dark logs of the Forest Service building. Then the smoke fog closed around her, and the running horse lifted him on up the timbered ridge toward an inferno that had raged unchecked for twenty-two hours.

He faced an afternoon of what the night and morning had been, a blind struggle against flames that had started in the lower foothills, and then had licked like a thousand-tongued red monster into the pines of the High Sierras. And he knew that only a miracle could save his forest.

As long as his lookout had sat in a tower high on top of the range, watching the whole scene and giving telephone directions, he had had some chance. But now there was no isolated voice to tell him which way the flames were running; where the fresh outbreaks were. For early last night a wind-whipped flood of fire had swept Lookout Mountain, driving his man down badly gassed and almost unconscious.

Leading in a fast lope, Pete Leonard crossed the ridge and plunged steeply into the canyon beyond. Savage black clouds, shot with flashes of red, were boiling up in front of him. They blotted out everything. The roar of the fire hammered painfully in his ears.

"Slim!" he yelled, throwing his words to the guard with no stop in the swift pace of their horses. "Take your tools to the ridge crew! I'll hunt for the bunch below here."

They parted, and the lank rider was instantly lost in the black, rolling smudge.

Farther down, a gaunt gray shape staggered drunkenly across the slope. A canteen swung from one hand. It was no one Pete Leonard had ever seen before—a recruit from the foothills.

The man turned a hollowed face at sound of the horse.

Pete leaned over him. "Where's the crew? What are you doing?"

Hunting water. Men're below—dry."

"No water up here. Come on." Pete took the canteen.

Toward the canyon bottom he found seven men futilely clearing a little path through pine needles in the face of a great flaming wall.

"No use, boys!" he shouted. "Come with me!"

They followed, dragging their shovels wearily, and once more he felt how feeble and blind his efforts were. But he set them to work higher up, cheering them, showing none of his own discouragement. Then he pushed on, hunting the rest of his disorganized fighters, and looking for water they could drink.

All the streams were black and bitter with ash lye. White bellies of dead trout dappled the surface of the pools. The sight sickened him—this had been his mountain paradise; he knew there would be no fishing here for Tom Hayden next summer. He ran into a second crew battling a spot fire that had sprung up a mile ahead of the main blaze. They were doing all that could be done——

FOR two hours Pete Leonard raced his little buckskin through the smother, vainly trying to direct his widespread army in some form of concentrated attack. The canteen was still slamming empty against his saddle, his throat was sanded, and every breath an agony, when he cut back toward the main canyon and reached the men strung along that slope.

Coming suddenly onto the first one, he pulled his horse over.

"Where did you get that?"

The man took his mouth from the metal spout of a water bag.

"It's being passed down the line," he said. "I don't know where from." Offering the bag, he asked: "Drink?"

Pete was reaching down, when there burst above them a gray pony. And Anne was riding it! He spurred toward her, hardly recognizing the cowboy outfit that had been so fresh and neat only a few hours ago.

Two canteens were strapped to her saddle horn, two more were slung from her small shoulders. One arm was bare in a ripped shirt sleeve; her hat showed holes burned in the crown and brim—she had come through a literal blazing hell to carry water to his men, and Pete Leonard knew it.

They came together, stirrup to stirrup.

"Anne," he protested, "you can't do this!" He was aware of how rasping his voice sounded.

Her own reached him with more determined strength than he had ever heard her use.

"I can do it, Pete, and I'm doing it! Here—drink. It may be your last chance."

He stared at her, but took the canteen and drank gratefully in long soothing gulps. Water cooled his throat and he spoke without the rasp.

"Anne, listen to me——"

She cut him off. "You listen! Your men need water. You have no one to spare for this job. This is no time to argue, but I could explain something to you, Pete, if you'd only believe it. You wouldn't, so I'm not going to waste a minute, talking." She took the canteen from him. "That isn't what I meant to tell you. Five cowboys are trapped in Red Rock. I heard about it when I came through." Her gray pony jumped at the touch of her heels.

She flung back: "Go to those boys, Pete! I can take care of myself."

Then she was gone, and there was nothing to show she had ever been beside him, except his fear. He wasn't sure she could take care of herself. She didn't know these mountains. And he felt, too, with a little rise of anger, that she was only doing this recklessly, after he had told her not to leave the station.

Back-tracking her pony, he came to where she had crossed Red Rock Canyon. From there it was easy to trail the cowhands by the tools they had dropped as they ran before the fire that had caught them. Shovels and axes with handles burned out, lay in the smoldering canyon bottom. Sight of these mutely tragic things sent a cold desperation through him. He knew Anne could be trapped in this same way—a quick shift of wind, a brush-choked canyon, and a wall of flames sweeping too fast for escape. He should have made her go back! A chilled tension, something closer to panic than he had ever known, gripped his tired muscles.

"Pete Leonard!"

The sudden voice jerked his head around. He had not noticed the square mouth of an old mine opening in the slope. A figure moved out of it. Pete wheeled over. A young face looked up and tried to grin.

"Almost got us, ranger. But we saved ourselves in here."

As four hatless, grimed cowpunchers crowded out of the tunnel, Pete Leonard saw dully that he had driven these poor devils long enough. He could drive himself till he dropped—it was his forest that was being laid waste, seven years of his life that were going into black

desolation. These volunteers had nothing of the sort to urge them on.

He said: "You boys go to camp. You've had plenty."

"No," the first one answered. His hair, Pete knew, should be blond, his face ruddy and good-natured. Black smudge covered him now, and the others all looked alike. "You tell us what to do," the youngster continued; "we aren't quitting."

"Come along, then," Pete said gratefully. "And I appreciate what you fellows are doing."

HE found a cache of tools in a metal box where the fire had not reached, then left his horse and directed the fight in Red Rock Canyon himself. He uprooted trees with blasts of dynamite, cleared a swath through the bottom brush, checked the first licking tongues with backfires.

Slowly the livid dusk that had held all day sank at last into a darkness through which great crimson blooms mounted, faded, rose again. His cowboys gave him all they had, but he couldn't believe they had any chance. They were still fighting a blind battle. He had no way of telling what might be happening in other canyons.

And yet, some time after midnight he began to see results. The edges of the fire in this spot were under control. Gradually he was turning the point of it toward the rock cliffs. It was dawn when the men began to yell hoarsely along the line. They had held the flames against the sheer rock, and now, with a swiftness that was startling, the leaping tongues dropped, the roar died—the blaze had burned itself out.

From a rise Pete Leonard stood watching, trying to penetrate the haze. Then as the strange hush settled around him, he was suddenly aware that on across the range the muffled roar had decreased. Smoke was thinning. A swift wave of elation went through his aching body. This forest fire was checked!

At a sound behind him he turned. A man carrying canteens and a gunny sack with rations scrambled down the slope, calling as he approached.

"Pull off your boots, Pete! The war's all over." He came closer. "But if it hadn't been for that lookout——"

"Lookout?"

"Sure. We've been getting telephone directions since midnight."

Pete grabbed the man's arm. "You're crazy! The lookout was gassed—there wasn't any other."

"A ghost then. But with darn good eyes just the same! The phone line's dead now, went dead half an hour ago. Say! Where you going? Here's grub!"

Pete Leonard didn't stop.

He flung himself into the saddle and lifted his buckskin up the backbone of the mountain. There was not another trained lookout in the forest—but last summer Anne had learned the instruments and map readings!

"—the phone line went dead half an hour ago——" That was what drove him so madly. It could mean anything.

He hurled his horse across a black graveyard of fallen timber, where yesterday the fire had swept up this flank of the range. Beyond that he veered from a swath of recent burn where pine logs were still blazing. He could see nothing clearly in the gray morning light—only in his mind were things desperately plain. It was Anne he saw there; and nothing else mattered, now.

Then the steel tower was ahead of

him, its high framework webbed against the dawn.

Swinging from saddle to ladder without a pause, he went up metal rungs that were hot in his hands. It was sixty feet to the balcony that surrounded the little glass house. There was no sound above him. Winded and gasping, he pulled himself to the balcony level, lunged across and peered in through the glass.

Anne was at the lookout table in the center of the room, her head down upon arms stretched over the forest map. But when he ran to the door and jerked it open, she looked up suddenly and faced him.

"Save it, Pete," she asked. "Don't scold me. I know you gave me orders not to leave the station."

She passed the back of one hand along her forehead, wearily pushing away tousled brown hair.

"I——" he began, but was too breathless

Then she was speaking, leaning back, her head tipped up to look at him, and her clear gray eyes meeting his with quiet contact.

"Pete, I've been thinking, up here—— There's something you don't understand about me, and I'm not going to argue any more. But I'm going to tell you, just once.

"This is a national forest. And I am part of the nation that owns it, do you see? It's mine, and I love it. That's the only reason I did this, Pete, if you want to know."

"But, Anne——"

"Wait. That isn't all I've been thinking. Perhaps you are right—about us. Next summer, when I come back——"

She swayed forward a little. The night had been long.

Swiftly Pete Leonard's hands caught her shoulders. He lifted her and drew her up close.

"You aren't coming back, Anne. That's what *I* have been thinking. You aren't, because this year I am not going to let you leave!"

STREAMLINED BEEF

SAYS Professor Howard J. Gramlich, head of the animal husbandry department of the agricultural college of Nebraska: "They are streamlining everything now; I see no reason why livestock feeding operations can't be streamlined.

"Twenty-five years ago feeders planned to develop two, three and four-year-old steers from 1,000 to 1,500 pounds. It was common practice to feed big cattle for a long period. Beeves weighed from 1,400 to 1,700 pounds. What will be the demand and custom twenty-five years hence. My prediction is, we will see a greater demand for light cuts of beef. We will undoubtedly see an increased call for the so-called super-baby beeves, these being calves of both sexes carrying a pretty fair degree of finish at live weights of 650 to 700 pounds. There will be some demand for heavy cuts—probably one load in 1,000.

"Practically everything we grow in Nebraska has its greatest value as livestock feed. Corn, fodder, barley, alfalfa, oats, sorghums should be consumed on the farm where they are produced. You'll see that in 1962. No inventor will come forth with synthetic beef. I have no doubt but what 1962 appetites will relish thick, juicy steaks and succulent roasts as much as we do to-day."

COW HORSES

(The Mustang)

By CHARLES L. McNICHOLS

I'M camped here on the North Umpqua in Oregon, and I see by the week-old paper that a rancher just gave me that they're rounding up the wild mustangs over in the Jordan Valley and shipping them off to a dog-meat factory up in Portland. Of course, I know they're a pest on most ranges, eating up grass that should go to make beef for the cowman, but just the same, it makes me feel pretty bad, because I know that if it wasn't for the mustang there would have been no West. At least, not the kind of West we know and love.

There would have been no free-ranging, buffalo-hunting Indians on the Great Plains to fight the cowboy and soldier for every inch of bunch-grass range, for before they had horses, and that was a couple of centuries before the white man came into their territory, the Plains Indians were mostly timid eaters of fish and corn, living in permanent earth-covered lodges, few in number, and inglorious in war.

There would have been no cowboys, either. There would only have been "herd-drovers" wearing flat heels and gaiters and riding flat saddles on nonbucking, English-

type horses. These "drovers" were the boys who tended cattle in the days when there was open range east of the Mississippi a century and more ago. When they crossed the Big Muddy and found the frisky, tough, free-bucking mustang and found he was the only animal that could stand up under the hard range conditions in the primitive West, they had to take over the entire horse equipment that Spanish-speaking Texans and Californians had developed to cope with the critter. Then they became cowboys!

Of course, range conditions aren't what they used to be, and neither is the mustang. Nowadays it's the Morgan, the Arab, the half-breed, and other blooded strains that make the top cow horses. The mustang was always too small, and too rough. A hard-riding cowhand could ride down a string of eight or ten in an average day on a calf round-up. Back in the '80s and '90s, a lot of ranchers thought they'd build up the size of their saddle stock by importing the biggest stallions they could get—Percherons and Clydes! These crossed on mustang mares got big colts all right, big, soft, clumsy animals that got bunged up in the feet and legs every time you rode them over a rolling hill. Worthless cross-breeds, such as these, bred back into the mustang race helped to deteriorate it, while good and worth-while mustang half-breeds lost their identity in other strains.

And the wild mustangs of to-day are a pretty sorry lot. They are, for the most part, descended from broken-down discards that have been turned loose on the range from time to time. Those romantic wild stallions that you read about—magnificent animals with all kinds of spirit and speed—there are a few of them. At least they were to be found occasionally not so many years ago. I saw one myself, in Mojave County, Arizona. But for every one of them there were a thousand scrubs. You can hardly blame the cowmen for sending them off to the dog-meat factories—but it makes me feel bad, just the same.

Originally, the mustang was descended from two fine types of horses, the Spanish barb and the Spanish jennet (not the mule of the same name). They also got considerable blood from the common Spanish pack horse, whose name and breed I have never heard. In 1539, DeSoto's expedition abandoned several horses on the western side of the Mississippi. These must have been of the two breeds first mentioned, because the gentlemen adventurers of the party would never have trusted themselves in a new and dangerous country unless they were riding the best horses they could get. At any rate, these animals became the ancestors of the great bands of wild horses that spread up the Red River Valley into what is now northern Texas and southern Oklahoma. Like all animals, when first introduced into a new country, they were free of enemies for the first few generations. The Indians called them "mysterious elks" and left them strictly alone and it took some time for the wolves and panthers to learn to prey upon them. Experts have figured that a stallion and two mares will have more than fifteen thousand descendants in fifteen years, given plenty of range and no enemies.

Between 1540 and 1600, several parties of Spanish explorers came up from Mexico as far as the plains of Colorado and Kansas. Many of them lost or abandoned horses whose descendants augmented the big herds that were roaming all over

the plains south of the Platte. Altogether, these animals breeding under primitive range conditions evolved into a new type of horse that we call the mustang, whose spirit and stamina came from the high-class Spanish barbs, and whose pig-headed cussedness probably came from the lowly Spanish pack horse. It's probably from the latter horse that he got his peculiar "mule" nose. Nearly all mustangs of the real old bur-tail breed have a mulish look about the muzzle that is easily recognized.

From his generation of life in the wild state, the mustang picked up several habits that added considerable to its fame. One is bucking. Among all the various breeds of domestic horses, the mustang is the only real, sure-enough, self-starting, "stem-winding" bucker. It is claimed he learned that from shaking off cougars. In time, these big cats discovered the taste of horse meat and liked it so well that they preferred it to all other fodder. A read good sunfishing, bawling, rearing, end-swapping bucker could get rid of a cougar unless the latter gained a pretty firm claw-hold. This mustang would live to have descendants that would be buckers. Puny crow-hopping buckers couldn't shake the cougar and they died without leaving posterity.

Also the ability to rustle a living where there were only about twenty-five blades of grass to the acre came to be a mustang characteristic, for in the West there have always been times and seasons when the best of ranges went bad, and only the best of foragers lived to see better times.

By 1610, settlements were established in New Mexico and trading contact was made with various southern plains tribes, such as the Comanches, the Utes, the Lippans, and the Pawnees, and as soon as the men of these tribes got used to seeing Spaniards and their Indian servants riding horses they decided that there was nothing so terrible about the "mysterious elk" of the white man, especially when runaway Indian slaves brought horses with them when they took refuge among the wild tribes.

At any rate, the Indians very soon learned to use horses for hunting, for war, and for packing purposes, and in 1680, when the great French explorer, La Salle, passed through the country, he found that all the tribes on the southern plains had plenty of horses.

Horses made a tremendous change in the life of the Indians. They moved out of their permanent or semipermanent earth lodges and began to live in buffalo-skin tepees and to follow the buffalo across the broad plains they had formerly shunned. From eaters of fish and vegetables they became almost exclusively eaters of meat, for they no longer remained in one place long enough to grow a crop.

But what had more bearing on the future history of our West was the fact that the horse made these Indians develop the art of war, far ahead of anything they had known before. As soon as they began to move around, they came in almost continual hostile contact with other tribes that were doing the same thing. Furthermore, while they started out building up their herds by catching wild mustangs they soon stopped that and took up horse-stealing as the easier, more adventurous and more honorable method of acquiring horseflesh. Tribes as far north as the Kiawa and the northern Piute soon were raiding as far south as Durango, Mexico, in search of fine horses. On these

forays, the Indians acquired both horsemanship and military skill to such a degree that European experts writing on the subject called them "the world's best light cavalry!"

Along came our American pioneers in the first part of the last century to run into the toughest opposition any white man ever encountered from a native race, and the only thing that saved them was they soon learned the Indian system of fighting and transportation which, as one old Comanche said, was, "Get plenty of horses. Use 'em!" A big remuda of mustangs went with every Indian village. Every family had from a half dozen to fifty horses which they used mercilessly, changing spent animals for fresh ones whenever possible and thereby making forced marches over such a distance and at such a speed that they had the white military experts scratching their heads.

The early cattlemen took this system for their own. The "cattle drover" east of the big river rode his one horse at a walk, but when he moved west and became a cowboy, he found he couldn't work a bunch of spooky Texas longhorns at that pace. Frequently he had to ride at a run even to keep in sight of the fleeing animals and often he had to ride over a country that was particularly tough on horseflesh. So Indian style, each man acquired a string of from six to twenty mounts. Mustangs were cheap. You could buy unbroken mustangs from four bits to five dollars, or you could have any horse, free, out of a wild herd—if you could get your rope on him.

Quick, light, tough, plentiful, and bred on the range, the mustang was made to order for the early cowboy.

Right here, let's dispose of the idea that "mustang" and "broncho" are two words meaning the same thing. "Broncho" is a Spanish word meaning rough and wild. In the old West they spoke of "broncho" Indians and "broncho" towns as well as "broncho" horses, and a horse of any breed might be called "broncho" if he were mean enough, but of course there were a bigger percentage of mustangs that rated that title.

Another thing, the so-called "native" horses of California and Texas were often confused with mustangs. While they were more or less of the same blood, the "native" was a superior animal, having a bigger percentage of Arab or barb blood and although range bred, he never was really wild. Spanish-Americans seldom rode mares. They turned them loose to raise colts and only worked them tramping out the grain in harvest season on the great adobe threshing floors. The result was that the native colts were about as wild as mustangs, but their sires were selected animals and therefore the breed tended to improve.

The sunset of the mustang came when the cattle business changed its emphasis from quantity to quality because of the diminishing range. The longhorn passed out because he returned small and poor beef for the amount of grass he ate. The Hereford, Black Mulies, and shorthorns that came in, demanded different handling. Where the longhorn ran, they walked, and it was soon learned that working these new cattle a man with two or three "good" horses, a Morgan, an Arab, a half-breed, or the like, could get along better than the cowpoke with a string of ten or so little crow-hopping mustangs, and the two bigger horses ate a lot less feed than the ten little ones.

Another thing, as the cattle moved north and west into the mountain ranges, mustangs were found far too light for mountain work.

But, just as there is longhorn blood in most of the grade Herefords on the ranges to-day, there is a good percentage of mustang blood in most of the present-day stock horses, in spite of the ever-spreading use of full-blooded animals.

One of the last stands of the mustang is on the Indian reservations and in the few remaining wild herds that still roam in inaccessible places. The Indian mustang has vastly deteriorated because of haphazard breeding and semistarvation due to poor or overstocked ranges. Now it's the dog-meat factories for them, too.

In the circuses the miserable nags that furnish meat for the cat animals are still called "Navajos," for many of them are half-starved mustangs from the Navajo Reservation.

TEAMSTERS' TRICKS

FREIGHTING with six-mule teams often called for ingenuity as well as experience on the part of the frontier teamster. When an icy spot in the road was encountered, the long chain by which the leaders pulled was unhooked, and wrapped around the felloes on the lower hind wheel of the wagon until it completely encircled it. As the wheel went ahead the weight forced the chain to cut into the ice and hold rigidly, and the dangerous crossing was made safely.

On steep grades where friction brakes would not be sufficient to hold, a wagon roughlock of steel was chained beneath a wheel, but even then, the teamster must know that the chain holding the roughlock in position should be fastened to the front axle on the up-hill side or the side nearest the bank; otherwise the dragging of the roughlock would pull the whole outfit off the grade.

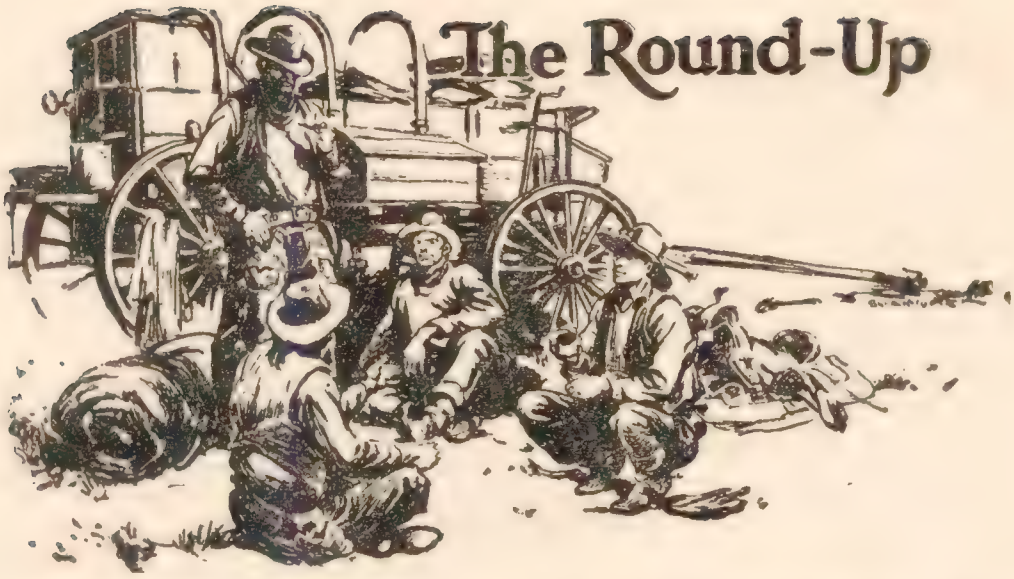
In early days snubbing was often resorted to. Trees now standing near some famous frontier roads yet bear the marks of the ropes by which the heavily loaded wagons were lowered down a mountainside.

The roads that were mere wagon tracks in the summer times were more easily traversed by sleighs, when the snow fell deep enough to fill the smaller gullies. Here, too, the teamster used many devices in order to build the road up after each new snow, and keep it smooth and level. One was to drag a V-shaped harrow, having short blunt teeth behind the rear bob, this cut the packed snow and spread it evenly, building the road wider and making it more solid with each trip.

Brakes on bob-sleighs appeared in the early '80s. Not the friction brake, of course, but heavy pieces of S-shaped chilled steel, bolted to the runners and connected with a foot lever, like any other brake. When pressure was applied, the lower end dug into the snow or ice and made a very satisfactory brake.

So successful have these been proven on western roads that the old-fashioned link roughlock is seldom seen any more. G. C. F.

The Round-Up



THE first thing that we want to get off our chest to-night is to bring you some good news which we know will interest you. We have got Charles L. McNichols to do us an authentic article on the Morgan horse, so watch for this, because it will be in a near future issue of Street & Smith's Western Story Magazine.

And now we have corralled Harry R. Keller, that swinger of rhythmic lines and occasional short-story artist.

It was on the lazy Illinois River, in the little town of Pearl, that Harry R. Keller was born. He, unlike some of those other writers, was not afraid to give the date, which was February 18, 1909. His father was the village blacksmith. He says that his youthful ambitions showed an apparent lack of originality, because in common with ninety-nine per cent of the small boys in these United States, he wanted to be a cowboy. Having scant opportunity to accomplish that aim, his yearnings turned into a different channel, the rearing of wild animals for pets. His indulgent parents never knew, upon opening the door, whether they would stumble over a 'possum, a woodchuck, a skunk, or a nest of flying squirrels as the newest addition to his menagerie. Or perhaps an owl would glare at them balefully from the ornamental crest of the family organ, or a pair of crows would shout profanity from the front porch banisters. In an improvised pool he kept schools of minnows, crawfish, and tadpoles, and an assorted dozen of small river turtles.

As he grew up, the desire to be a cowboy stayed in the back of his mind, but still circumstances did not allow the expression of this desire. His only recourse was to write about the kind of life he would like to live. His confidence was buoyed up by his having won a valedictorian scholarship. The principal of his high school staked him to his first typewriter, a fabulously constructed Oliver, standing two hands high and weighing a pound less than a horse. For the next eighteen months he proved the sturdiness of this machine. At the end of that period he had a comprehensive collection of

rejection slips from the country's leading publishers. And then came the surprise and delight of his life, a check from an editor in payment for three poems sold to Street & Smith's Western Story Magazine. He was eighteen then and he had made the discovery that while his stories still needed something that he hadn't put into them, there was no doubt that he had rhythm and that he could sell poetry. For the next five years he wrote poetry exclusively, selling the bulk of his output.

During these five years he acquired a wife and they moved to a Missouri farm. Then he sold three stories. This gave him the impetus to go to the West that he had been writing about for seven years. So, with his earnings, he bought a second-hand Ford, and with his wife and young son started out.

The West did not disappoint him. In Wyoming and Montana, in Idaho and Washington and British Columbia he found glamour and grandeur beyond his wildest imaginings. He says:

"I know now that no pen, least of all my own, can ever adequately portray the West as it was, and is today. We who write of it can only strive humbly, with an awed sense of our own unfitness, to convey to our readers some faint inkling of the majesty of this vast empire of silence, of desert and forest and crag, of clean winds and white water; hoping that what we say will inspire others to see for themselves this stupendous land. For of the wonders of the West, more truly than any other thing I know, may it be said that 'seeing is believing.'"

Among the various things which Harry R. Keller has done besides writing, he served varying apprenticeships as a blacksmith's helper, grocer's clerk, bookkeeper, commercial fisherman, plowboy, and night cook in a restaurant. He managed a dairy farm in Missouri, picked cherries in the valley of the Columbia River, and thinned apples in the orchards of Wenatchee. He even turned cowboy for a short period on government range in Idaho.

His first child, five years old, wants to be a cowboy and his second, a few months old, he believes will want to be one because of the fact that his legs are already bowed.

Here is an outstanding feature of Mr. Keller's life: We feel now, more than ever, that he truly belongs to Street & Smith's Western Story Magazine. Aside from having bought his first poem, and first story, Mr. Keller met his trail mate through The Hollow Tree. She is an Idaho-reared girl and loves the West with the same enthusiasm as her husband.

Occasionally Mr. Keller returns to Illinois, but not for long. He says that the pull of the mountains, once felt, can never be long denied. There is a weathered log cabin waiting for him on the banks of a foaming trout stream in Idaho's Selkirks. There are trails that lead to alpine lakes hidden in green fir woods, or to lonely lookout towers perched perilously on lofty peaks; trails on which you may find the fresh tracks of bear and deer. There is no scent more exhilarating than the pungency of pine, no breeze so fresh as that which blows across the everlasting snows of the high country. There it is that he plans to spend his summers in various phases of ranching, forestry, and wild life conservation, and his winters in writing better Western stories and poems.

MINES AND MINING

By

J. A. THOMPSON

This department is intended to be of real help to readers. If there is anything you want to know about mining or prospecting, a letter inclosing a stamped and self-addressed envelope sent to J. A. Thompson, care of Street & Smith's Western Story Magazine, 79 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y., will bring a prompt authoritative personal reply.

Letters unaccompanied by a return envelope will be answered in this department in the order in which they are received. But as space is limited, please keep such letters as brief as possible.

IN Nevada nature evidently believes that one good gold boom deserves another. Following the rich Austin strike that precipitated a gold rush to Jungo, outside of Winnemucca, in the northern part of the State, comes a first report of another fabulously rich field just discovered down in the southern sector of Nevada in Clark County.

Ore found in the new strike is said to run twelve thousand dollars to the ton. Bonanza gold ore!

This is probably the discovery Phil Berryman referred to in his recent letter from Birmingham, Alabama, asking us about "some big gold discovery just made in southern Nevada." At any rate, it has all the earmarks of the beginning of another bonanza boom for Nevada.

Early word of it appeared in the Denver *Mining Record* in the discovery story sent from Las Vegas, Nevada. Said the *Record:*

"Ore returning an assay value of $12,768.72 per ton in gold and silver has been discovered on the Belmont group of six claims in Iceberg Canyon, owned by T. W. Kendall, deputy State mine inspector, and associates. While little was given out regarding the exact location of the strike, it became generally known that it was made in what is called Iceberg Canyon reached by boat 60 miles up Lake Mead.

"The scene of the strike is in Clark County in a section of country almost inaccessible except from the lake. While it is believed news of the sensational strike will bring about an old-time stampede, Kendall warned anyone going in *not to attempt the trip by car.* Towering mountains overlook the find. Only experienced prospectors—men who known their way about mountain country and can withstand the hardships of such a trip—are advised to enter the country at present. Later, possibly, a suitable road may be built up the canyon from the lake,

permitting cars and trucks to make the trip, but even then they will have to be transported by boat to the canyon mouth."

There she is, Berryman. A honey from the first looks of her. Later on in the season we will probably be hearing more concerning this new gold discovery in Iceberg Canyon. All data that comes to hand will be carried in these columns as soon as possible after receipt. Watch them regularly each week for further details.

A "single-jack," H. P., of Tampa, Florida, is a light, single-hand hammer used in rock drilling. Four pounds a good working weight.

To G. V. C., Pasadena, California. Yep, valid lode locations can be made over abandoned earlier locations.

Also interested in British Columbia prospecting this week is one of our Canadian readers, B. C. B., of Winnipeg. He wants to know if there is any place in British Columbia where mineral specimens may be sent for a free examination. There is, for specimens originating in the Province itself. We have already given B. C. B. the address of the Government bureau that offers this aid to prospectors, and we'll be glad to give the same address to other interested readers who might be planning a prospecting trip to British Columbia. Just write in and ask us for it.

Now for the query of Arthur O., who writes from Louisville, Kentucky, and wants to know if there is really a chance of any more big gold booms being uncovered. There is, Arthur. In fact, a whopper has just been discovered according to a recent report in the New York *Times*. The new field happens to be in Russia. Says the *Times* in a special cable dispatch direct from Moscow:

> A new placer field of great wealth which a competent authority has declared is "richer than Alaska" is being developed in the desolate virgin territory of Eastern Siberia, about a hundred miles north of the little town of Okhotsk on the fringe of the Okhotsk sea.
>
> It is learned that sixty thousand men are already working it under engineers of the Soviet Gold Trust.

So you see, Arthur, you never can tell when, or where, a gold boom will break next.

And B. C. T., of Baton Rouge, Louisiana, wants to know what is meant by the "walls" of a lode mine. The walls are the native rock on either side of an ore-bearing vein. The layer of rock on the top side of the vein is known as the hanging wall. The rock on the lower side forms the footwall.

Alfred King, of Philadelphia, asks us if we know of any gold mined in Pennsylvania. As a by-product, yes. The Cornwall Mines in Lebanon county are essentially iron mines, but they also contain some copper mixed with gold and silver, which is saved as copper concentrates. These concentrates, according to reports, contain about 23 per cent copper, 0.10 ounce of gold, and an ounce of silver to the ton.

O. B. F., of Charlotte, North Carolina, wants enlightenment on what a prospector means when he speaks of 'hungry' rock. We admit, O. B. F., that colorful as the word is, it offers no exact description of rock condition. However, vein material such as plain white quartz that is hard, compact, and barren of all traces of metallic ore values, is often referred to by miners as 'hungry' rock.

The HOLLOW TREE

Conducted by

HELEN RIVERS

It is a natural impulse and it is a good impulse to desire to wander and to roam. Not too much, of course. But the desire to go places and see things should be and is in all of us—in all of us who amount to anything, at least, for traveling educates us, and changing our geographic location often is of great benefit to health, mind, and economic well-being. A wise man once said, "A rolling stone gathers no moss," but a wiser man, we think, added, "but a standing pool stagnates."

If you are one who would travel, it is a mighty good thing to have man's best asset along the way, and at your destination. We mean, of course, friends.

If you would like a friend or friends in a certain section, write to Miss Helen Rivers, who conducts this department, and she will put you in touch with readers who want to correspond with folks in your part of the world.

It must be understood that Miss Rivers will undertake to exchange letters only between men and men, boys and boys, women and women, girls and girls. Letters will be forwarded direct when correspondents so wish; otherwise they will be answered here. Be sure to inclose forwarding postage when sending letters through The Hollow Tree.

Address: Helen Rivers, care The Hollow Tree, 79 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y.

ABOVE the Mojave country of California are the Sierra Nevada range lands. "Golden Lake Prospector" is making a trek into that section in the spring and he will be taking two good pards along.

Dear Miss Rivers:

I have followed gold mining for more than forty years. I want to make a prospecting trip up in the Sierra Nevada Mountains this spring to prospect for gold and other minerals. Very few people go into this country that I speak of. There is a lake that I call "Golden Lake" because I have caught beautiful golden trout there. The altitude is over eleven thousand feet. Where I intend to prospect it is eight or nine thousand feet elevation. It is one of the wildest parts of the country. California bears, deer, cougars, wolverine, mink, and martin are found, and it is a very good place to trap in winter as the snow gets up to ten feet deep. There are also silver gray fox and otter, mink, and martin. You know there are many good mining camps high up in the mountains, as for instance, Leadville, Colorado, which is in the ten-thousand-feet elevation.

Now I want to hear from two young men to work and prospect with me for about thirty days, and help me pulverize and pan rock. They must have enough of a grubstake between them to pay for assays and also to pay for the grub. We should have an old tent in case of rain, and we must have an old machine to take us to the foot of the mountains. We can then leave it there with the forest ranger until we come back.

Yes, boys, I want to try my luck next summer again in the old Rockies. And if

any of you folks of the old Holla want to know about Mount Whitney, Pike's Peak, or Death Valley, I will try to answer any questions you would care to write, and will give you any information I can. And now just one more word. These two young men I am looking for to go with me must, of course, be of good character and references will be exchanged. I am living in San Francisco at the present time and expect to start out from here in June.

GOLDEN LAKE PROSPECTOR.
Care of The Tree.

Is there an old-timer who has a place for Lucky?

DEAR MISS RIVERS:

For over ten years I've been a member of the old Holla. What I'd like The Hollow Tree to do for me now is to get me in touch with some party who has a paying mine and who would like a helper. I guess there are a lot of folks who could use help if they knew whom to trust. I have had about two years' experience in mining.

Now, folks, as my grubstake is kind of on the rocks I would like to have you speak up as soon as possible. LUCKY.
Care of The Tree.

A Louisiana girl is seeking new friendships.

DEAR MISS RIVERS:

Will every one write, from far and near? I am interested in people and what they are doing, and I would like to receive missives from everywhere and from all who care to write. I live about sixty-five miles from Barksdale Field, the world's largest airport. It is a lovely place. I can also tell of several interesting things about my State and I promise to answer all letters as promptly as I can, for I do love to write and receive missives. I am neither old-fashioned nor modern—just a mixture of both. I love to swim, hike, ride horseback and collect pictures. I am a girl of twenty-three. GLADYS MURPHEY.
Bienville, Louisiana.

Ranch hands are especially invited to speak up.

DEAR MISS RIVERS:

This hombre is a country boy, raised on a farm. I am twenty-one years of age, and I would like to get in touch with ranch owners or cowboys from Arizona, New Mexico, and Colorado. I have plenty of time to answer letters, so I will promise to answer all and to make them as interesting as possible.

I am a lover of horses and cows, and all the great out-of-doors. S. A. BOUDOIN.
Route 1, Mansfield, Georgia.

Hombres who are interested in trekking into one of the wildest sections of the Sierra Nevada mountain country will want to contact the Golden Lake Prospector through the Old Holla. Wear your friend-maker, membership badges, boys, and send your letters along pronto.

Twenty-five cents in coin or stamps sent to The Hollow Tree Department, Street & Smith's Western Story Magazine, 79 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y., will bring you either the pin style or the button for the coat lapel. In ordering be sure to state which you wish.

Michael hails from South Africa.

DEAR MISS RIVERS:

Here's hoping that this twenty-five-year-old hombre from South Africa gets some Pen Pals. I would like to hear from all readers who are interested in correspondence. I can assure all who write a speedy reply, and I will answer letters written in French as well as in English. I can tell many interesting things about my travels over the seven seas and of curious experiences I have had in China.

MICHAEL JOHN OOSTHUIZEN.
108 Lancaster Avenue,
Post Office Craighall Park,
Johannesburg, South Africa.

Josephine hopes to corral plenty of Pen Pals.

DEAR MISS RIVERS:

We have a thirty-acre farm a few miles from Geneva, New York. I am a girl of sixteen who loves out-of-doors life. I'd like to hear from some cowgirl from Texas, Arizona, California, or Nebraska. I am very much interested in cowboy life and wish to visit Texas or Arizona some day.

Sometimes I exchange jobs with my brothers, Sandy and Louis. They do the

housework and I do the farm work, such as feed, clean, and water the animals. I like animals. My mother, four brothers and sister want to move to the city, but I prefer to live on the farm. Mother and I are the only ones home from nine o'clock in the morning until four thirty in the afternoon, so I get lonesome sometimes. After my work is done I'd like to be writing letters and running to the mail box. So please get busy and write to me, girls.

JOSEPHINE VALERIO.

R. F. D. 3, Box 90, Preemption Street,
Geneva, New York.

An old-timer is looking for a grubstake and a pard.

DEAR MISS RIVERS:

I am quite anxious to correspond with some one who has a grubstake and who would be interested in prospecting and mining. I have a good claim in Colorado and I need a good pard with a grubstake to help me. So won't some one come to my rescue? I will do the right thing by you, pard, as I have had quite a lot of experience at prospecting and mining.

D. M.

Care of The Tree.

What are the opportunities, folks, for this young hombre if he decides to go West?

DEAR MISS RIVERS:

This hombre is very much interested in the Southwest. I have always wanted to get work out in that part of the country on an honest-to-goodness cow spread or horse ranch. I am by nature a horse lover and up until a short time ago I had a couple of my own, but circumstances forced me to sell out. So I am footloose, and want to try the West. I have worked around horses and cattle all my life, and know quite a bit about ranch work. I would like to be a pardner to some rancher, but I could only swing a very small grubstake into the deal. I would like to get in touch with some one out there to find out about work. It doesn't have to be ranch work right on the start but anything that a fellow could do for a while. If it did happen that I could get work on a ranch with some old people who would like to have a likable young fellow and an honest, square-shooter around, I would be willing to work for my board and clothes until I could sort of get located. I can ride, rope, and shoot. I have my own rigging—saddle, bridle, ropes, and spurs. I am also pretty well outfitted with clothes. So please write, folks, and tell me what you think of my chances for work in New Mexico or anywhere in the West. I have a small stake to start out with, and several people have advised me to go West. I am eighteen years old.

D. H. CALLAHAN.

Route 1, Comanche, Oklahoma.

Arizonans and folks from New Mexico are asked to speak up.

DEAR MISS RIVERS:

Well, here I am back again after an absence of three years and, gosh, how I have hated the frozen North with all the snow and cold weather. Give me the old Southwest and the sunshine! Friends, what I am craving to hear about is homesteads in the States of Arizona and New Mexico. In either one of the two I am going to settle and prove up on a homestead. I am sick of the city, having lived here for twenty-three years in the same ward. So can any of you give me the dope on how to go about it—filing on a claim, and all of the things that you feel I ought to know?

To the first three who answer I'll send them a dandy one-hundred and-sixty-page cook book and I will also try to get one for each one of you who answer.

CHARLES KRUEGER.

10721 Buffalo Avenue,
South Chicago, Illinois.

From the "Windy City" come these Pen-Pal seekers.

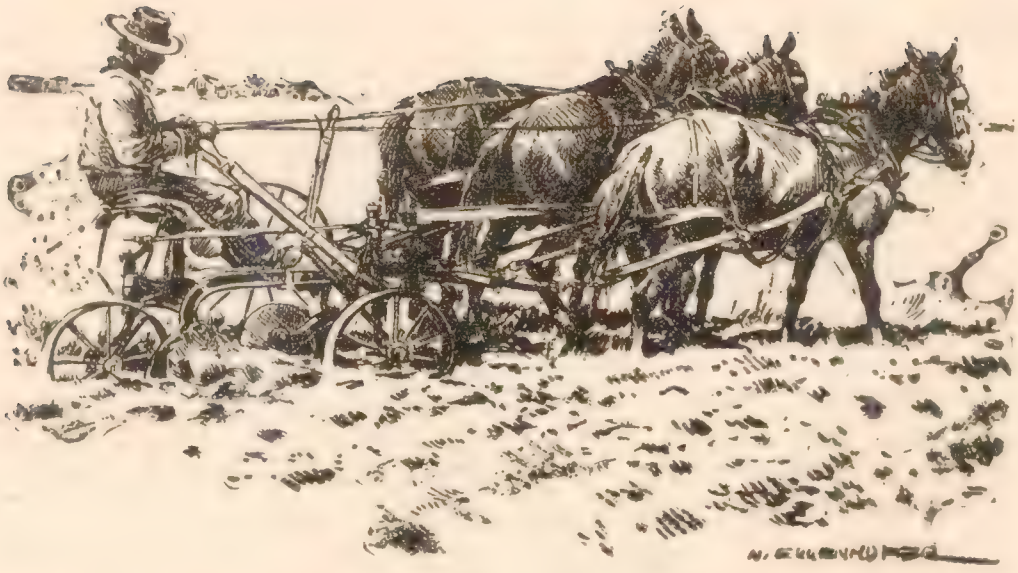
DEAR MISS RIVERS:

May we, two roommates living in the Windy City, have a corner in The Hollow Tree? Not having the opportunity to travel ourselves we would like to travel via the mails. So, Pals, wherever you are, send us a letter telling about yourself, your hobbies, recreations, and the place where you live. All letters will be faithfully answered.

Frances is twenty-eight years of age. Her hobbies are collecting stamps and souvenirs. Sylvia is twenty-two years old. Her hobbies are collecting handkerchiefs and full match booklets. We are both fond of dancing, singing, radio, movies, music, and all sports and traveling. Write to us, you readers of The Hollow Tree, and we'll swap snapshots, souvenirs, and letters with you-all. FRANCES NEWELL.

SYLVIA DOTZEL.

7455 Greenview Avenue,
Chicago, Illinois.



WHERE TO GO And How To GET THERE

By JOHN NORTH

We aim in this department to give practical help to readers. The service offered includes accurate information about the West, its ranches, mines, homestead lands, mountains and plains, as well as the facts about any features of Western life. We will tell you also how to reach the particular place in which you are interested. Don't hesitate to write to us, for we are always glad to assist you to the best of our ability.

Address all communications to John North, care of Street & Smith's Western Story Magazine, 79 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y.

MANY hombres who are planning to travel westward this summer in search of new farm locations are busily engaged these days in equipping their trailers, looking up routes, and nosing out information about promising regions. Such is the case with Carter W., of Utica, New York.

"When warm weather rolls around, Mr. North, I expect to be all set to hit the highway pronto. My destination will be northern Idaho, where I am told I'll find some mighty good locations for farming. Several different sections have been suggested to me, among them the Lewiston district, the Palouse country, and the Weippe Prairie region. Any details you can hand out about these particular localities will surely win you the eternal gratitude of yours truly."

In our opinion, Carter, you're on the track of some genuinely worthwhile Western country. Northern Idaho, especially the portion tribu-

tary to Lewiston and Moscow, has not received the attention from prospective settlers that it deserves, due, no doubt, to the fact that it is not on through main-line transportation systems and highways. Reached by branch railway lines and north and south connecting roads, however, it is not far off the main direction of travel and merits inspection by those who are seeking a new location.

Here you'll find a variety of climate and kinds of farming. The seasons average long. The area is protected from the extremes of severe weather by reason of the Rocky Mountain barrier on the east, which shuts out the cold and hot winds which sweep across the Great Plains. The summer climate receives tempering influence from the west, as does the State of Washington from its close proximity to the Pacific Ocean and the marine influence on weather.

If you are interested in irrigated farming, you can find splendid land for this purpose in the vicinity of Coeur d'Alene or in the Lewiston Orchards district near Lewiston. The latter is especially given over to truck crops and fruits and most of the places are relatively small, although many are operated by their owners on a full-time basis, raising tree fruits, small fruits, vegetables, and other crops requiring intensive cultivation.

The Palouse country or northern Idaho is much like the area of the same name in the State of Washington—large ranches, rolling topography, wheat alternated with fallow, the main farming program. However, row crops have come in in lieu of summer fallow on many of these ranches, with field peas the leader in such a plan. Barley, oats, alfalfa, and some corn are grown and hog raising has become important.

There are three distinct prairie plateaus which reach out from Lewiston in a vast farming country. One of these is the Weippe Prairie, which offers a new frontier for settlers. It is reached by following up the Clearwater River to Greer, on the Northern Pacific, and then climbing to the north and east to reach the prairie country, which really is a combination of prairie and virgin timber. Weippe is a village which serves as the business center for the community.

The Weippe Prairie has been tried out agriculturally. As the sawmills, which have many years yet to operate there, have moved back, farms have been developed and have been improved as time passed.

In its native condition, the country is a succession of small prairie spots, heavily grassed and surrounded with large timber, most of which is white pine. The lands now cut over are available to the settler at low prices which allows the man with limited means to develop a home and a producing farm. Diversification is the backbone of the agriculture on Weippe Prairie—poultry

SPECIAL NOTICE

THE WATERPROOF CUT-TREE SHELTER

If you are caught in the woods overnight you can make yourself cozy and comfortable with a waterproof cut-tree shelter which can be rigged up in a jiffy by even the inexperienced outdoorsman. Specific directions for making this shelter may be obtained from John North, care Street & Smith's Western Story Magazine, 79 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y.

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